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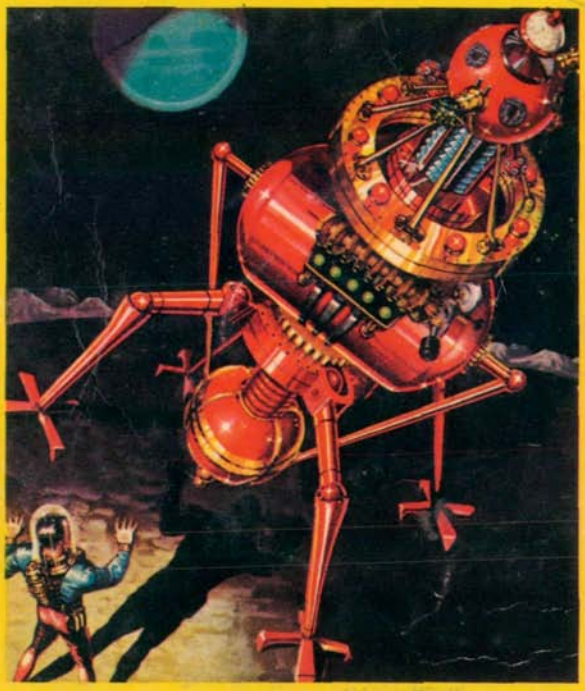

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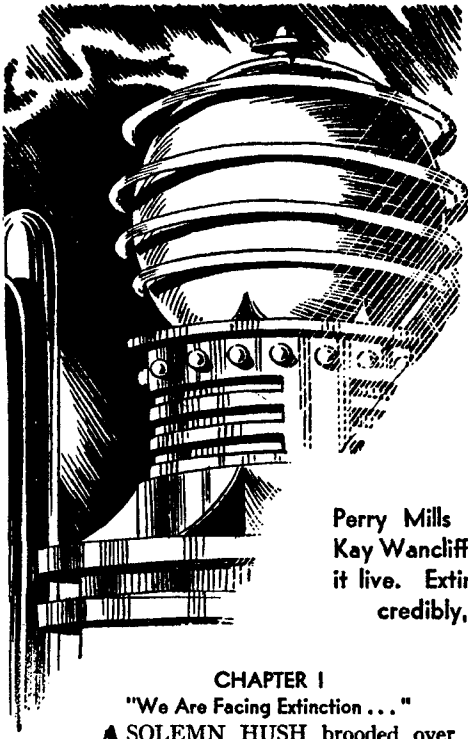

WORLD Without WOMEN

By Thornton Ayre

Perry Mills patterned a synthetic body in Kay Wancliffe's image. But he could not make it live. Extinction faced mankind. Then, incredibly, the lifeless body spoke . . .

CHAPTER I

"We Are Facing Extinction . . ."

A SOLEMN HUSH brooded over the mighty Chamber of Deputies in the new White House at Washington. The innumerable seats, rising tier on tier to the granite walls, were lined with grave, anxious faces. Men's faces, of every age and hue. All eyes were directed toward the small rectangle of dais in the center of the vast place.

A voice boomed out suddenly over concealed loudspeakers.

"Gentlemen, Kindon Gregory, President of the Americas!"

There was a shuffle and scrape of countless feet as everybody rose. Then seats were resumed as the small, compact figure of the President arrived at the dais. He surveyed the radio television transmitters around him, then gazed round on the great assembly.

"Gentlemen . . ."

His voice was somber and colorless, so different from the fierce, commanding tone he had used at his election campaign in 2016, four years previous. Now it was the voice of a man who has little left for which to live.

"Gentlemen—deputies of every science from every land. I need hardly elaborate the circumstances of the terrible crisis that faces us. Unless science can master the present conditions, humanity and all life as we know it must pass from the earth! At the very most, human beings cannot be present for much longer than eighty years. All of us have experienced the biting sting of tragedy, have seen our womenfolk die around us, subtly and mysteriously, from an unknown malady which medical science utterly failed to diagnose.

"In 2015 we had a happy, prosperous

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world. War had been banished; prosperity reigned everywhere. Then—if I may be permitted this harrassing resume—in the Christmas period of that year, the blight started. Women, young and old, rich and poor, began to die. Not only women, but everything female in every branch of life. The blight was all inclusive, was in every country almost simultaneously. Wherever a female child was born it died almost instantly, despite all efforts to keep it alive, until . . . Until by the end of 2018, two years ago, there was not a woman left in the world!"

The President's voice was quiet for a moment. He gripped the sides of his desk with obvious emotion. When he spoke again his voice was suddenly desperate.

"Gentlemen! Men of science the world over, wherever my voice reaches you, I beg of you to use your abilities to master this horrible thing which has come upon us! Maybe it is selfish to regard a woman as a necessity to the continuance of life, but I do state that in cold truth. Throwing aside all love and natural human longings, the cold biological fact remains that without women in the world mankind must perish. And, my friends, we *shall* perish unless some woman can be found who has escaped the trouble. That, I know, is utterly improbable. The earth has apparently been swept clean. If we fail in that search there is only one other course—Synthesis!"

"Synthetic life?" cried a voice from the back of the hall.

The President shrugged slender shoulders. "What else? I appeal to you scientists, particularly the biochemists, to give every ounce of your knowledge to the problem. The natural means of creating life has gone—there remains only synthetic womanhood. If not that, then synthetic life itself, either man or woman. But obviously a synthetic woman is simpler and demands less material. Even one alone can start a race once more. That has got to be done. If not, humanity is finished!"

"But synthetic life is impossible!" cried Jonathan Hale, the famous British chemist.

"Nothing," answered the President quietly, "is impossible. To science least of all. Gentlemen, I urge you—"

PERRY MILLS reached out a languid hand and switched off the small televizor by his bedside. The speech and face of President Gregory disappeared.

For a long time Perry lay in silence, listening to the faint, drowsy sounds of the great New York nursing home. Occasional coughs, the sound of rubber soled feet. Men in white drifting to and fro. Men, men, men. . . . Everywhere men! Perry sighed deeply, lay staring up at the white enameled roof.

"Queer," he muttered, "to pull a guy back from double pneumonia when the human race is finished anyway. If they haven't eliminated pneumonia germs after all this time they've got slim hopes of producing synthesis!"

He closed his eyes, only to shortly open them again at the awareness of somebody near to him. He beheld a neatly dressed young man with close cropped black hair and keen gray eyes, carrying a pile of magazines under his arm.

"Hi'ya, Perry!" he laughed, saluting. "Any room for Bill Tanner around here?"

"I'll say!" Perry exclaimed eagerly, sitting up. "I can just do with some company . . . " He glanced at the magazines. "What? More stuff to read?"

Tanner shrugged as he sat down. "Afraid they're pretty old—four years

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old, in fact. All sorts of periodicals. I had a clean out of my cupboards yesterday and thought maybe you'd like to read through them until you get out of this place."

"Be out in another week, so the doctor says. . . . Thanks, old man; I'll be glad to have them." Perry stopped and frowned, his blue eyes thoughtful. "Hear the President's speech?" he asked briefly.

"Most of it. It was relayed to the street televizors. . . . I guess things look pretty bad, Perry. Since woman vanished from the earth things have gone to pot. Only to be expected, of course."

There was a moody silence for a moment, then Tanner spoke again.

"You know, Perry, I don't see why you can't do something about all this. You're a first class biochemist. You've got all the degrees and you've got the money, too. If you hadn't been ass enough to get pneumonia through making a tomfool experiment in the rain, I guess you'd have been invited to the Chamber of Deputies."

"Mebbe," Perry shrugged moodily. "I'm not so hot."

"Oh, snap out of it, Perry. This is no time for false modesty. Some of your chemical inventions have advanced science a hundred years, and you know it. Sure, you don't like publicity, and keep in the background for that very reason, but more things have come out of that laboratory of yours than all the concentrated efforts of fifty bearded experts. Look at the money you've piled up! Governments don't pay huge sums like that unless you've given them something worth while."

"So what? Oh, I get it! You're suggesting I should turn my attention to synthesis of life?"

"Sure I am. You've got the brains to solve it if anybody has."

"Perhaps so, but synthesis is something just beyond science. There's a missing element which makes all the difference between inert clay and living, breathing humanity. . . . Oh, I admit I've thought about the idea as I've lain here convalescing. I've read several medical textbooks on human structure, have made a pretty thorough study of the stuff that makes up a human being, but. . . . No, Bill! I guess synthesis of life is right outside the pale."

Tanner sighed and got slowly to his feet. "Well, you're the scientist, not me. I'm sure you could do it if you only had some incentive." He paused and glanced at his watch. "Sorry I can't stay any longer, but I haven't your ability to be independent. The Bureau of Statistics don't like their experts to be late, you know. See you again."

"Oke! And thanks for the magazines." Perry waved a cordial hand and watched Tanner's lithe form disappear down the long ward.

FOR a long time he lay pondering, then picked up the topmost magazine and glanced idly through it.

Being an issue of the pre-Blight era, its social pages were filled with color photographs of men and women celebrities. Somehow, Perry found it gave him a queer sensation to gaze on women of all ages and types. They had been rather attractive, at that, had done an enormous lot to make the world decorative—far different from this new coldly masculine, harshly designed world of men alone.

He turned the page of social celebrities and found a full length color portrait of a young and decidedly good looking girl staring back at him. Her eyes were very blue, her hair the color of well ripened corn. Her dress of pale blue with pink whatnots and rib-

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bons was a masterpiece of feminine allure.

Perry's gaze dropped to the caption under the picture.

Miss Kay Wancliffe, daughter of Dr. Elroid Wancliffe, the famous scientist and engineer. Kay will be twenty-one next month. Congratulations, Kay!

"Oh boy, oh boy!" Perry whistled, staring at the picture again. "What a girl! Elroid Wancliffe, eh? Seem to have heard of him somewhere in connection with a rare metal. If only . . . "

"Synthesis . . . " he breathed, eyes closed. "Make a woman. . . . If only I had the incentive! Carbohydrates, phosphorus, lime—Hell! Incentive! Who says I haven't got incentive?" He sat up with a jerk and snatched the magazine again. "By all the saints, I have!" he whispered. "If it *can* be done, I have the model right here. Get all the dope I can concerning her. Yeah, that's it! Make a woman! Just like this one. One of the nicest girls I've ever seen! It's possible, perhaps—"

He stared into space, tugging at his underlip. Already his keen brain was racing far ahead, hurdling natural difficulties. His whole horizon was filled with a view of Kay Wancliffe. Kay, the inspiration. A girl he had never known or seen in the flesh, now dead.

An hour later Perry was still staring into space, was positively rude when the male nurse came around and ordered him to lie down.

CHAPTER II

"I Have Created Her Body . . . "

TANNER was agreeably astonished when next day he received a telephone call from the nursing home and heard Perry's clipped, eager voice at the other end of the wire.

"Say, Bill, I've been thinking over what you said—and I guess there is something in your ideas at that. Listen! You're in the Bureau of Statistics: can you get me all possible details on a girl named Kay Wancliffe, daughter of Elroid Wancliffe, scientist? She'd have been twenty-one in July, 2016. I think she lived in New York here. I want her exact age as it would be today, her dimensions, coloring, every darned thing about her. A complete record of her entire life, her medical record, and all photos you happen to have. According to the new world census law of 2007 there ought to be as much detail about her and her family as there used to be about wanted criminals. Even to the finger prints. Get it?"

"All the facts will certainly be tabulated—everybody's are," Tanner answered. "But what the devil do you want it all for?"

"I think I'll make a woman. . . . Tell you more later. How long will it take you to rush through those details?"

"I'll ring you back in an hour. That do?"

"O.K."

In the intervening hour Perry occupied himself making a skeletal design of Kay Wancliffe's head and face from her photograph. Then the phone rang again.

"Perry? Here's the low down. Kay Wancliffe would now be twenty-five years old—July 6. She didn't die from the Blight. Her body, and that of her father and mother, were found dead in rather curious circumstances a year before the Blight came. The bodies were discovered in the private surgery of Doctor Danver Hall, the famous American neurologist. He too was dead. All four were buried in the Fourth Precinct Cemetery. Since all relatives of the Wancliffe's were women there are of

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course no living witnesses to explain matters."

"Hmmm . . ." Perry grunted. "Any photographs or records?"

"Sure. There are six good photographs you can have, some from the family possessions and others taken professionally for census reasons. I'll send them around if you want."

"Of course I want!" Perry snorted. "Bring them around the moment you get the chance. And thanks."

BUT it was next morning before Tanner found the time to come around; and then Perry became so absorbed in the prints it was impossible to get a word out of him. Tanner gave it up at length and departed. Thereafter, excess of work kept him busy for several days. The next time he met up with Perry he found him in his old laboratory once more, a tattered smock covering his spare form, a pipe clenched resolutely between his teeth.

Denham, Perry's old retainer, closed the laboratory door gently. Tanner stood staring across at his friend over a wilderness of benches and bottles, wrinkling his nose in disfavor at the variety of unsavory odors curling round him. Slowly he walked forward, stared down into an oblong bath of highly polished metal, at the bottom of which floated and stirred a mass of pungent compounds.

Perry's only greeting was an abstracted nod. His eyes were on the bath. Facing it, on the opposite wall, was a tremendous life size chart of a woman, fenced around with all available enlarged photographs of Kay Wancliffe.

"So you're back on the job?" Tanner asked at length. "What this time? What was there about Kay Wancliffe that suddenly turned you into a dynamo?"

"Everything," Perry answered briefly. "That's the second Kay Wancliffe in the bath there."

"Huh?" Tanner stared blankly at the weird mess.

"The world wants synthetic life," Perry went on slowly, his brows down. "It wants a woman—the first of a race of synthetic women. I'm going to do my best to fill that need. The first woman will be the image of Kay Wancliffe. If I were the marrying sort, Bill, she's the one I'd go for. Queer, perhaps, to fall in love with a photograph, but there it is. She's the posthumous inspiration of my work. . . . Even as a sculptor models from real life, so I am modeling from a photo and records. Every measurement will be identical with Kay Wancliffe. Then, maybe, I can make the model live. . . ."

He became silent, hands thrust in his smock pockets. After a while he spoke.

"This stuff in the bath is only the beginning—it's a mixture of glycerols, albumens, hydrocarbons, sugars, and so forth, all the elements that go to make up a human being. These compounds have to be formed, moulded cell by cell. Every scrap has to be syntheticized, until at last comes the time when I must try and infuse life into the whole. There will lie the biggest problem."

"How long do you imagine it's going to take you?" Tanner asked quietly.

"How can I say? Many months, certainly. Not a single detail must be overlooked. In order to live, everything about this model must be correct. What does it matter if it takes me a lifetime, so long as I succeed in the end?"

Tanner remained silent. The last thing he could picture was the mess in the back turning into a desirable woman. That was where his limitation came in. He had not the vivid imagination or the genius of Perry Mills. To Perry, the end of the experiment was known while he was still at the beginning.

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WHILE the scientists and political leaders of the world wrangled and argued and experimented, Perry Mills worked. Day in, day out, ceaselessly, regardless of everything—through the weeks and the months. He never left his home, frequently toiled all night, deaf to all the exhortations of both his retainer and Tanner to give himself a rest or take some exercise . . . No, he'd have none of that! More important things to do than take exercise.

A year passed. Perry's terrific mental endeavors kept him in good health. He was as lean and energetic as ever, clear minded, steeped in the profound technique of his task. Tanner, visiting him constantly, keeping all he knew entirely to himself to prevent a flood of newshounds, had seen that original mess of compounds undergo amazing changes.

Little by little, Perry had built up masses of bone, muscle and nerve tissue, forming them under the influence of needle fine electric radiations. Cell by cell he had arranged the whole incredible structure, producing the outline first, then gradually shifting and positioning the syntheticized parts into their right formations. He had linked up the nerves, socketed the joints, created the flesh. The first mass of elements had formed at last into the recognizable shape of a woman.

He labored for another six months, working with ever increasing skill as his knowledge expanded. He made wax moulds and created synthetic flesh impressions from them. He spent days on the fingers, on the hair roots, precisioning every detail—until at last he had produced a perfect female body, now removed to a glass case, a body that had everything, except eyes.

Tanner surveyed the alabaster whiteness of the pseudo-girl in the tube, then turned to look at Perry. The young chemist's face was set and resolute, a little more lined than at first, more than a trifle anxious.

"Certainly she's Kay Wancliffe over again," Tanner muttered. "Those empty eye sockets aren't so good. But everything else — The hair even! You've made that grow, anyhow."

"Simple," Perry growled. "Hair is only vegetable growth, anyway, and the class of pigment makes the color. I simply stimulated vegetable compounds with mitogenetic radiations. Any fool could do that. A gooseberry does it naturally, anyway."

He eyed the flawless body in silence for a while. "The eyes are hardest," he muttered. "Iris and pupil, retina and cornea, nerve connections. Going to be difficult—but I'll master it finally."

HE did—three months later. Tanner found himself summoned urgently from the Bureau of Statistics on the evening of December 7, 2020, to see the finished work.

As usual, he found Perry in the laboratory, gazing thoughtfully at the silent figure in the case. The eyelids were closed, but they had beneath them the soft roundness of eyeballs. Perry raised one of the lids gently, revealed a flawless but vacant blue eye.

"See?" he smiled. "I made it! I used a photo iris diaphragm for my example and used contractor muscles sensitive to light. I constructed two eyes identical to those of a natural human being." He rubbed his slender hands slowly together. "I sent for you, Bill, because I want you to be the sole witness when I infuse life into this lovely creature. I'm all set to go."

"You really believe you *can* create life?" Tanner asked quickly.

Perry slowly nodded, waved his hand to the massive electrical machines banked around him.

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"This apparatus, I hope, will duplicate the effects that must have been present at the beginning of the world when the earth was born. It was chemical fusion; science admits that much. Life could only have happened through one agency—solar radiation. Life is basically carbon, mixed with the right proportions of hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, and so forth, such as we have here in this completed figure. At the dawn of time all those elements existed, but what changed them from merely atoms to atoms *plus* life? Only one thing, as scientists like Jeans, Eddington, and others have freely admitted—a radiation which was present at the dawn of the world but which was finally lost as the sun cooled and grew older.

"I have worked on those lines, studying solar phenomena and getting all possible clues and observations from the major observatories of the world. I have calculated backward to the sun's temperature at the earth's time of birth. Without doubt, there were several ultra short radiations in being at that time, produced by the great heat. . ."

Perry pointed to the machines again, grouped at either end of the case in which the body lay.

"When I release those machines," he said slowly, "a tremendous electric current will completely shatter a piece of iron in a specially constructed chamber. Iron is one of the basic elements of the universe. I shall release its atomic energy, but before that energy can escape it will go through converting chambers which will alter its wavelength to the one I require. That radiation wavelength will pass clean through this case and, I believe, will infuse inert atoms with that one basic electric reaction which we call life!"

Perry stood regarding Tanner eagerly, glanced once more at the motionless, exquisite being he had at last completed, then he seized the master switch of his bank of electric machinery and slammed it home.

SPARKS flared, dynamos whined. Amazing globes began to shift up and down on smooth pistons. Tubes flared through all the colors of the spectrum.

Tanner stood waiting tensely. Perry, a demon of activity, played like a pianist over a row of controlling keys, finished up with jamming home another switch and turning simultaneously to stare at the case. At either end of it massive electrodes glowed with the surge of power.

Seconds . . . Minutes . . . Perspiration rolled down Perry's face with the intensity of his emotion

The figure in the case remained motionless.

"It's got to work!" Perry breathed. "It's *got* to!"

One minute—Three. Five . . . No motion. Only the glowing electrodes and whining dynamos. Very slowly Perry reached out and cut off the power. Silence fell, an awful silence in which Perry's hard breathing sounded unnaturally loud.

"I—I failed," he whispered dully. "I failed! I was wrong! My God, after all my work—" He looked round in bewilderment, his face ashy white in the glare of lights.

"Suppose—" Tanner began, but Perry cut him short with a shout of fury.

"Perhaps nothing!" he yelled. "Don't start making suggestions because I don't want 'em! Get out!"

"Now listen, Perry, take it easy—"

"Don't tell me what to do, Bill. Get out, before I do something I might regret!"

"O. K." Tanner nodded quietly. He could see his friend was at the breaking

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point with despair. Silently he left the laboratory.

Perry stared at the closed door, breathed hard, then hardly conscious of what he was doing he turned moodily and started to pace up and down with his hands locked behind him. Once or twice he gazed at the motionless form in the case, hesitated over tearing it out and destroying it with acids. Finally he thought better of it, went to the window and stared out on the calm beauty of the winter night. The stars, the rising moon in flecks of soft cloud.

"Where *did* I go wrong?" he muttered fiercely. "Where?"

He turned abruptly and snapped a switch. The lights went out. He sat down heavily in his well padded chair by the window and gave himself up to thought. With external impressions shut off and only the ghostly shadows for company he felt better able to concentrate.

But after a time he could feel reaction setting in. The crushing disappointment of it all. A drowsiness was upon him. His thoughts would not focus properly.

CHAPTER III

"I Am Not Alive . . . "

PERRY jumped suddenly, and guiltily realized he must have fallen asleep. The laboratory was still unlighted, but the beams of the newly risen full moon were shining strongly through the window, glinting back from machines and glasswork, bathing the case of the synthetic woman in a silvery glow.

Perry yawned and stretched himself. His head felt clearer for the nap. Slowly he got to his feet, then paused in his forward movement and frowned. An alien sound was in the laboratory—a gentle scraping, tapping noise. Or so it sounded to be at first; gradually he realized it was a voice trying very hard to speak and croaking in the doing.

In spite of himself Perry felt his knees tremble. Though it was insane, incredible, there remained one stupefying fact—the sound was coming from the open end of the tube where lay the head of the synthetic woman! She was whispering, apparently to herself.

"If you hear me, come! If you hear me, come! Listen! Whoever you are!"

Perry came back to himself with a bang, switched on the lights. The woman failed to move in the slightest as the glare smote down on her. She remained motionless, her eyes closed. Perry stared down at her in blank bewilderment. Her lips were moving, her tongue was passing up and down between her teeth. He clamped a hand over her heart. It was beating with the steady rhythm of life! And yet despite her steady breathing not a trace of color came into her face. There seemed to be no circulation worth mentioning. Alive, yet dead? Trying to talk?

Perry tried hard to think straight, use the routine science demanded. He whirled round and snatched up a thermometer, jabbed it under her tongue; instantly it was pushed out again, smashed on the concrete floor. He took another one, thrust it in her armpit. It registered room temperature, nothing more. She was not alive!

"What the hell. . ." Perry groaned, clutching his hair, then he pulled the thermometer away and stooped closer to try and catch the incoherent babblings from that mouth. He fancied they were English words. Impossible, of course, but—

"Doesn't make sense!" he muttered, driving his fist into his palm. "The electric current could not possibly have a latent effect. Either she would have come alive at that moment, or never. When the current stopped she ought to

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have remained inert clay."

"Whoever you are, listen!"

THERE was no denying those words. They were pure English, and the living-dead girl had uttered them. Perry leaned forward in open mouthed amazement. His creation seemed suddenly to have got her tongue disentangled.

"You cannot be expected to understand the full implication of all this. I pray you know the English language and understand what I am saying. I can only assume you have made an image of Kay Wancliffe. I'm trying to tell you that although. . . No, I'll try another way. I am Kay Wancliffe, and I am in a grim predicament; so are my father and mother who are with me. If indeed you have made an image of me, please understand that this image is not alive, is only a carrier for my thoughts."

"Huh?" Perry stared fixedly as the low tones stopped for a moment. He lifted an eyelid; the eye beneath was glassy and lifeless.

"For various reasons I am not able to give the full facts now," she resumed suddenly. "You have it in your hands to save three people from a desperate plight, and the world from certain doom. At least, so far as the death of humanity is concerned.

"Womankind was deliberately destroyed. Why, and how, I hope you will later learn. At the moment I can only ask that you do whatever this carrier of my thoughts tells you to. Obey implicitly!"

Perry nodded dumbly. This listening to a voice from a girl who had never lived—the voice of a girl who had been buried for four years! — was more than he could possibly figure out.

"You admit," she resumed, "that the mind controls the body, and that the brain is the most sensitive organism for the conduction of thought? I will assume you do admit that. Through various means I can't now explain, mind force is enormously amplified and operates through this body for only one reason, because its brain is identical to my own. It so happens that you must have made a perfect model of me, that's why it responds so well. I presume it *is* a model. I cannot conceive of anything else. If I am right, I believe vocal organs will respond to my thoughts and enable me to speak to you.

"After all, is it so amazing that you have made a perfect model? Did not Jeans say long ago that six monkeys, given sufficient time, would be able to type off a Shakespeare sonnet?* The law of chance, which in this case has operated first time. Not coincidence; science does not admit of coincidence. You must have made an exact model, even down to the right number of brain cells. I never expected anything so wonderful. I shall speak to you again soon. For now, I must say goodbye."

Perry hesitated over saying something, then stared blankly as the girl's lips ceased to move. Mechanically he felt her heart; it had stopped. Her breathing had ceased. The unknown motivating life force behind her had been removed.

"I can't believe it," he whispered. "It's uncanny! Kay Wancliffe is dead and buried. This girl does not really live. . ."

HE sunk his chin on his chest, moved slowly across the laboratory. In the course of his amblings he came into the glow of moonlight still streaming through the window. He looked up suddenly, gazed out on the serene, silvery orb.

"I wonder. . ." he breathed. "Is it possible? When the moonlight fell on

* "The Mysterious Universe."

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that model it became alive! The moonlight alone could not do it, but it at least proves the moon and earth were in a direct line. . . But, can Kay Wancliffe be *on the moon?*"

He shook his head in bewilderment.

"What am I saying? How can she be? She's dead and buried. She could not throw her mind over 240,000 miles. Buried," he repeated slowly. "Sure the bodies were buried, all three of them, but what did those bodies contain? Suppose. . ."

He swung round and snatched up the telephone. In a moment he had awakened Bill Tanner from heavy slumber at his home.

"Well? What?" Tanner growled sleepily.

"Shut up, and listen," Perry said briefly, then he shot off the whole story with a bewildering disregard for details. Poor Tanner was obviously too baffled to speak straight. He could only gulp and ask what he could do about it.

"Plenty," Perry answered crisply. "You've got one of those new Z-ray machines at your Bureau, haven't you? One of those things that emit a ray capable of penetrating earth but which kicks back when it comes to flesh and blood structure?"

"Sure. We use it for examining buried people instead of the old messy business of exhumation. Why?"

"At the earliest possible moment I want you to examine the graves of Kay Wancliffe and her parents, get me a report on their bodies. They've been buried a long time, but in those new type lead coffins there'll still be some traces of structure left. I believe." Perry finished absently, "that they were buried without their brains! Kay, in particular, had no brains."

"Huh, she wasn't the only one!" Tanner grunted; then he sighed. "Well, I think you're screwy, but I'll do it."

"Only by being buried without her brain could Kay Wancliffe be alive right now," Perry snapped. "Quit making cracks and get busy the moment you get the chance. . . Oh, sorry to have disturbed you. Good night!"

He put the telephone down thoughtfully.

"If I'm right, how the devil did Kay get to the moon without her body?" he muttered. "How does she. . . ? Oh, hell, what's the use. I'll go nuts if I think round a prop much longer."

He gave the motionless body a final glance, switched off the lights and left the laboratory. In an hour he was asleep.

TANNER wasted no time following out Perry's request. Though work prevented him from coming personally the following morning, he sent the proofed plates by special messenger.

The moment Perry studied them, blurred in details though they were from the inevitable decomposition of the bodies concerned, he knew his shot in the dark had been right. There were no brains in those three bodies! For some reason they had been removed, and the only man who could ever have explained it, Doctor Danver Hall, was also dead.

"Do you hear me? Are you there?" Perry swung round as the soft voice reached his ears. In a moment he had put the plates down and hurried to the side of the girl in the case. She was ephemerally alive once again.

"I shall have to speak quickly. I have only time for absolute details, nothing more. Get a notebook, please. . . . Now, I am going to reveal to you the secret of space travel. I place you on your honor as a scientist not to reveal the secret to anybody else until given permission. It is still the secret of its original discoverer, Elroid Wan-

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cliffe, my father. You are ready?"

Perry nodded automatically, began to scribble in shorthand and scientific jargon as the girl spoke steadily, her eyes closed and body motionless.

Perry's wonder increased as he wrote. The space traveling system revealed to him was utterly unlike anything he had expected. No suggestion of rocket control entered into it. Instead there was described to him a system of screens, exactly covering one half of a theoretical ship. The screens were ordinary berylium steel, but the ship itself was composed of a highly radioactive metal, Element 105, which in itself was totally impervious to gravitational attraction, even as glass is transparent to light.

At a given temperature in manufacture the stuff went through a mutation, flew away from normal sources of attraction instead of toward them, and could only be prevented from so doing by the insertion of a berylium shield immediately beneath it. *Wanthorium*, the girl called the stuff—made from elements which any advanced chemist could easily compile. The essential secret lay in the temperature ranges.

"You will construct a ship to suit yourself for size," the girl concluded. "See that it has weapons of defense, and also that it is equipped with all possible surgical instruments, such as you must have used to make your model. When you are finally ready you will leave for the moon.

"When you reach the moon give a radio signal; I will pick it up. Also bring with you the model, through which I will direct your actions. How we got to the moon you'll discover later; it is too involved to explain now. I can only speak to you when the moon is at the full. Whether it be on your side of the earth or not is of no consequence. The radiations I am using for thought transmission pass through the solid mass of the earth.

"I shall not be able to speak again until the next full moon—and not then unless matters here are very favorable. I am surrounded by dangers. One thing I beg of you—hurry! Hurry!"

The girl's lips closed. Again she was lifeless clay.

CHAPTER IV

"We Have Reached the Moon . . . "

THE GIRL did not speak again. She lay passive through the weeks as Perry manufactured a sample piece of *wanthorium* and found it did all that was claimed of it. At the stated temperature in its cooling it vanished from its sandbed, smashed a hole through the roof of the laboratory and disappeared into space, destined to travel the eternal deeps forever.

Tanner came at intervals, said little, stood watching the workmen Perry had engaged as they labored on the skeleton of a metal ship in a newly added section to the big laboratory. Perry had little time to talk; his explanations were brief in the extreme. Neither did he pay any attention to the screamings of country leaders as they demanded action by the scientists to save the human race.

Time and again President Gregory had spoken to the world, usually giving the same speech as on the first occasion —but each time now it was charged with increasing anxiety. As the death rate went steadily on, as men the world over died from either natural or violent causes, the expectation of life for the human race correspondingly shortened. Science had confessed itself beaten, knew nothing of the lone biochemist struggling with might and main to sort the mystery out.

Exactly six weeks after the girl's initial instructions the vessel was finished. The workmen had constructed the ske-

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leton only; Perry himself manufactured and fitted the *wanthorium* plates, placing them in position before it reached its critical temperature and afterward covering it with berylium shields. In this way he had no difficulty in handling it.

"When do you figure on going?" Tanner asked, surveying the gleaming ovoid in the floodlights. He had braved a particularly beastly winter night to come over and see the thing at Perry's request.

"Right now," Perry answered briefly. "Everything's ready. The girl's inside. On a hunch I've put some clothes on her; my own. I'm loaded up with provisions, guns, surgical instruments. I've given Denham an indefinite holiday, so. . ." He shrugged. "Only the hop to be made, I guess."

"Wish I was coming with you," Tanner sighed enviously.

"What's stopping you?"

"My work, of course. I can't just walk out and do as I like."

Perry smiled twistedly. "Try a bit of logic, old man. In a little while men will start fighting each other when it is fully realized—as far as they know anyhow—that humanity is finished. Men always like an excuse for a fight; they're a vile breed you know. Ordinary business like yours will go to pot. Only the toughest will survive to the end. You'd do much better to take a chance and come with me."

Tanner pondered for a few moments, then he suddenly nodded.

"O. K., I will. I don't need much persuading. I've made private arrangements for a vacation, anyway. Let's be going."

HE LED the way through the airlock into the vessel's small and compact interior, stood regarding the roughly clothed girl on the specially designed bed by the curved wall. Perry stopped only long enough to shift the switch that opened the workshop roof, cut out the lights, then he came into the control room and slammed home the heavy operculum.

He settled down before the switchboard.

"Grab yourself a seat and strap yourself into it," he ordered curtly. "This *wanthorium* stuff is mighty powerful and achieves a terrific acceleration. Once we're clear of these storm clouds the moon will be visible. She's at the full again, anyway."

Tanner nodded and seated himself. Then he felt as though the bottom had dropped out of everything as Perry closed the switch actuating the berylium shields. The moment the shields moved to the top of the ship the *wanthorium* exerted its weird powers, lifted the ship like a feather and hurled it into the night at terrifying speed. The sensation was one of headlong, terrible falling into nothing.

Perry gave a gasp and struggled mightily with his weighted hands to close the shield switches. Tanner was held motionless, his heart laboring mightily, the room swimming before his eyes. He fought desperately for breath, reeled into darkness.

THE stinging taste of brandy was in his mouth as he recovered consciousness to find Perry bending over him. Perry himself was white and strained, had obviously been through considerable physical stress.

"Sorry, old man," he panted, as Tanner got unsteadily to his feet. "I underestimated the power of *wanthorium*. It gets up speed at an incredible pace. I've cut it down now so that our acceleration is equal to earth gravity. We're O. K. now."

"Thank Heaven for that!" Tanner

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rubbed his aching head, slowly moved to the outlook port and stared outside. In a moment Perry had joined him.

Right ahead of them, seeming far larger than ever before, was the full moon, bulging and globular, shedding its brilliant silver light into the utter black of star ridden space. Tanner narrowed his eyes and stared at it.

"Funny thing about those bright streaks and rays," Perry murmured. "See them? From Tycho, Copernicus, and other craters? Always visible at full moon when the sun is directly overhead on the moon's surface. No man really knows what they are, how formed, or anything about them. They travel over all parts of the moon's surface, independent of mountain ranges and everything else."

Perry paused, frowning.

"Something wrong?" Tanner asked at length, not quite recovered from the breath taking beauty of the view.

"Mebbe; I don't know. Just struck me as queer that Kay Wancliffe gets busy on her double at full moon, at the same time as the streaks and rays. Don't suppose there's any connection, but it's queer."

"Like lunacy at full moon?" Tanner chuckled.

"Yeah; and that isn't so preposterous as it sounds. Such things do happen. And by the way," Perry went on musingly, "the death of women started at full moon and recurred at every full moon after that, until — until there wasn't a women left in the world. Say! That looks like more than coincidence!"

"You're not trying to connect up the death of womankind and interstellar telepathy with the bright streaks and rays, are you?"

"Perhaps. . ." Perry relapsed into silence. It was clear the matter interested him. At last he shrugged and turned aside, sat down at the controls.

From then on he said but little. Hours passed. He and Tanner took turns at the controls, losing all count of time. They realized finally that several ordinary days and nights must have elapsed and the moon was nearing her third quarter when she loomed below them—no longer a globe, but a black plain embraced in the utter cold of the lunar night.

Perry stared through the window fixedly as he brought the ship curving down into the raven shadows of the lunar Appenines. He clicked on the short wave radio, spoke a few brief sentences.

"We've reached the moon. What do we do next? Awaiting your instructions. . ."

He slowed the ship's speed and circled around, waiting. The Earth, huge and magnificent, disappeared behind the mountain range. The sky was naught but brilliant stardust.

CHAPTER V

"My Life Is in Your Hands . . ."

TANNER gave the slightest of shudders. For the first time the utter weirdness of it all struck home to him. This commonplace journey to the moon, when it should have been an event of world shaking importance; the tomblike silence outside; the girl who had never lived lying motionless on the bed in Perry's old suit. Tanner turned to study her, then he started as he saw her lips moving.

"Perry!" he whispered tensely. "The girl! Look!"

Perry gave her a brief glance, then nodded. "Good—she's going to communicate. . ." He turned back to the controls, more accustomed than Tanner to the girl's strange moments of ephemeral life.

"You have reached the moon," she

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stated impassively, and this time her voice was much stronger. "From the direction of your radio wave you are apparently on the eastward side of the Appenines. Before long, if you proceed northwards, you will reach a crater some four miles in diameter, easily distinguishable because it is elliptical and not circular in shape. Descend into it. Deep down, nearly at the core of the moon you will find me. I will tell you how to do that when you arrive."

The girl became silent again. Perry glanced at Tanner, then he squared his jaw, swung open the floor window and looked down keenly. The searchlights flooded the starlit blackness of the lunar night. He slowed down the ship's speed still further, juggling with the shields. gradually the vessel passed over an infinity of rills, gullies, and pits, until at last he detected the crater the girl had mentioned standing alone in the middle of a dead sea bottom.

He altered the controls, pushed the ship's nose down and dropped into the cavernous hole, searchlights blazing into the darkness. The terrific width of the natural shaft made it impossible to see the sides. All Perry could do was work with half opened shutters and lower the ship inch by inch.

One mile, three miles, five. . . Ten, fifteen. . . Then Tanner gave a shout.

"Look below! Some kind of illumination!"

Perry nodded. He had already seen a pale lavender light, increasing in intensity as the ship went down, until finally they burst into a titanic cavern and beheld the source of the illuminant. At opposite ends of the huge natural hole were two monstrous metal bars, remarkably like electrodes, from each of which streamed an unwavering flood of lavender light concentrated on a glowing ball, invisibly supported between them.

"Energy of some kind," Perry muttered, frowning. "Plenty of science behind the idea too. They've figured out a way to make positive and negative power mate together at a given point and produce a flood of light. Nice going. . ."

"And machinery . . ." Tannner breathed, screwing up his eyes and staring amazedly. "Look at it! As far as the eye can see. Machines upon machines, of all sorts and sizes. So much so it looks like—It *is!*" he whistled. "A city of machines instead of buildings! Say, what do you know about that?"

"Nothing—yet."

PERRY tightened his hands on the controls and flew swiftly over the vast reaches of the machine city. There was no doubt about it. There were no recognizable buildings, no people, no sign of anything except the machines—small, squat, and in flawless condition. What was more, they were working! Every one of them, their wheels and cogs spinning steadily. Each one of them was working out some individual destiny.

"This has got me licked," Perry muttered at last. He glanced at the instruments connecting with the ship's exterior. "Anyway, there's no air here," he grunted. "Only explanation is that the moon's a rock sponge, open right through to the cold and air-lessness of the void. Won't affect machinery, of course, but it will certainly affect living matter like us. If we go outside we'll need space suits—"

"What's that?" Tanner interrupted him, pointing. "Looks like some kind of guardian machine."

Perry stared ahead at a monstrous object on four heavy metal legs, standing alone in the center of a circle of machines. Slowing speed to minimum he crawled toward it, flew round it, stud-

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ied the queer design of the thing. Somehow, it had the outlines of a human being; it even had arms fitted with vast pincer hands. Clumsy four-pronged feet, too, providing a means of solid, unsliding foundation. It stood perhaps thirty feet high, dominating the smaller machines around it. Apparently it was motionless. The weird quasi-human effect was further accentuated by two projecting lenses on the cannonball-like head, creating the appearance of projecting, many-faceted eyes.

"Gosh!" Perry yelped suddenly, as he flew round the back of it once more. "I just caught sight of an indented name on one of the metal plates. It said 'Fowler Incorporated.' They're the biggest engineers in New York. This thing belongs to Earth—"

"Stop your ship!"

Perry and Tanner both swung round at the command. It was the girl speaking. Perry glanced back at the monstrosity through the window, then he slowly brought the ship down in front of the colossus.

"Is—is Kay Wancliffe inside that?" Tanner whispered.

Before Perry could make a response the girl spoke again.

"LISTEN to instructions! Inside this metal robot are three brains in air conditioned cases, floating in a life preserving fluid which produces all the essentials of life away from the body. The three brains are my own, my father's, and my mother's. Of course you followed my wishes to bring surgical instruments? Listen very carefully. At the top of the jeweled globe my brain lies inside its special section of the case. Remove the glassy case and sever the connecting wires on the side of the green jewel. Afterwards, subject the brain in that third-section to anaesthesia and place it inside the skull of the woman you have made. It should exactly fit in the place of the one you have already made, which of course can now be discarded. You will connect up all the synapses, ganglions, neurons, and so forth. You can do it. You made that model without flaw; the rest will not be difficult. Remember, my life is in your hands. Once I recover, I can explain. There is not the time now."

Perry stood in thought as the girl's lips ceased moving; then he turned to the cupboard and dragged out a space suit and a small portable extension ladder.

"Then you're going to do it?" Tanner demanded.

"Sure I am. What the hell do you think we came for? I can do what she wants all right. I learned all there is to know about surgery when I made this woman. You're going to help me. Grab that other space suit from the closet."

Tanner nodded rather reluctantly, followed Perry outside as he opened the airlock. For a while, now they came to walk, they had to flex their legs to accustom themselves to the lesser gravity, far more noticeable outside than in the vessel.

Then at last Perry went slowly forward, planked his ladder in front of the monstrosity and climbed slowly up to the head, stopping when he was above the massive compound lens that formed the green "eye" of the thing.

He found the proper section of the brain compartment easily enough, pulled various tools from his belt and got to work. In fifteen minutes he had cut through a maze of wires and lifted out a transparent section containing a gray organism floating in yellowish fluid. Two other sections remained.

Tanner eyed it doubtfully, even with repulsion. He was no biologist. Perry's face did not seem in the least perturbed

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behind his helmet glass. He descended the ladder slowly with the precious braincase in his gloved hand. Only when he had his space suit off and the airlock closed did he expel a huge sigh of relief.

"Whew! That was ticklish work."

"I don't like it," Tanner grunted. "Something horrible about all this. It's —it's repulsive, Perry!"

"Repulsive be damned!" Perry retorted, rolling up his sleeves and washing his hands in disinfectant. "A brain's a brain whoever it may belong to. I've rarely seen one better developed. Come on, give me a hand into this smock!"

HE angled up his hands and slipped into the spotless white overall, snapped on rubber gloves and face mask.

"Better do the same," he ordered briefly. "You've got to help me on this. Switch on those floodlamps."

Tanner obeyed, washed and prepared himself as he watched Perry lift the limp model of the girl onto the long table under the lights. He slipped the brain case into the anaesthesia cabinet, broke the case away.

Tanner came forward, could not help but marvel at the incredible skill with which Perry worked, handling the living, anaestheticized brain with astounding delicacy, supporting it with surgical instruments which touched in spots where no harm could be done. Perry himself considered he needed no praise. This job, compared to the making of a woman from raw materials, was mere child's play. His main anxiety was to finish the operation and bring life to this beautiful body which so far had only been a mouthpiece.

An hour passed as he labored on under the brilliant arcs, Tanner assisting tirelessly. The skull of the model was opened, and the useless brain replaced with the living one. With smooth efficiency, using electromagnetic beams and instruments of glittering immaculacy, Perry linked up the vital connections one by one, grafted back skin and bone onto the skull, wiped it with pungent ointments and finally left not even the trace of a scar. And, since the entire top of the skull had been removed for the purpose, not even the hair was shaved away. At the close of the operation only a thin pale line, rapidly disappearing, round the girl's head over her eyebrows, was the only trace of the surgical miracle.

Perry stood aside, shaking now from reaction, mopping his perspiring face with a towel. The girl lay motionless, but as her brain at last began to clear of the anaesthetic her breast began to rise and fall slowly. For the first time

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since her creation color crept into her dead white face.

Perry snatched up a stethoscope and held it to her heart.

"She's alive—at last!" he whispered. "Sixty beats to the minute. By the time she's fully recovered it will be hitting the normal seventy two. Reflexes O. K. . . ."

He turned aside, regarding the girl in silent wonderment, and not a little affection. But something was still puzzling him.

"Why should life just happen because a living brain is put inside a body that has never lived?" he asked in a low voice. "Has this girl solved the secret of life, or what? Is life purely in the mind. . . .?" He stopped reflecting, then with a sigh he sat down to wait.

An hour later he and Tanner were rewarded by seeing the girl's blue eyes slowly open as she gazed in wonderment about her.

CHAPTER VI

"I'll Tell You My Story . . ."

IMMEDIATELY the two were at her side.

"You're alive—at last!" Perry whispered exultantly, as her vivid eyes turned to him. Then he swung round to Tanner. "The restoratives, quick!"

"O. K."

Between them, they raised the girl's head and shoulders, forced the biting restoratives between her lips. She coughed and spluttered for a while, then rapidly began to gain full possession of her senses. Slowly she sat up and flexed her arms, wiggled her fingers in something like awe. Perry stood watching her in critical silence. She was more beautiful than ever now, she had come to life; yet still he couldn't understand the miracle.

The girl turned to him at last and smiled a little.

"So *you* are the kind friend I have to thank for getting me back to life!" she exclaimed. Again she flexed her arms and fingers. "You can't believe how wonderful it is to have a body again after spending several years having mechanical things do what your limbs ought to do." She stood up slowly, accustomed herself to the gravitation, then walked to the mirror on the wall.

"It's positively uncanny!" she exclaimed at last. "The law of chance certainly operated to the full when you modeled me, Mr. ——?"

"Mills. Perry Mills is the name. This is my friend, Bill Tanner— And I might add, Miss Wancliffe, that neither of us know what's going on. What's the explanation of all this?"

"I'll tell you . . ." The girl turned slowly from the mirror, her blue eyes grave and serious. She seated herself in the nearest chair and kept shifting her legs in bewildered delight as she talked.

"When father discovered *wanthorium*—which was quite by accident —all of us realized that space was open to us. Naturally, by 'us' I mean my father, mother, and myself. But we also realized that in visiting some planets we would of necessity meet up with some very hostile conditions—such as poisonous air, even no air at all, strange beasts and entities, all kinds of troubles. That worried father. He couldn't see us trusting just to space suits if we wanted to make a thorough tour—so out of his doubts and plans grew the rather amazing idea of a spacial robot."

"That colossus standing out there?" Perry asked quickly.

"That's it, yes. There was also considerable doubt that a human body in its entirety would be able to stand the

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terrific speeds at which *wanthorium* travels, and unless we did move at a terrific speed it might take father far more than his lifetime would allow to make an extensive tour. Father finally came to a decision, and ultimately mother and I agreed with him. We got the cooperation of father's friend, Dr. Danver Hall, and as an expert neurologist and surgeon he thought the idea was feasible. The idea was to remove our brains, a by no means difficult feat to the surgery of this twenty-first century, of course, and leave our bodies behind to be taken over on our return. The bodies would be charged with long period anaesthetic, enough to keep them in suspended animation for ten years or so. Dr. Hall would look after them."

Perry smiled bitterly. "I see. Maybe you don't know that they were all buried when Dr. Hall suddenly died?"

The girl shrugged. "I didn't know, but I had a suspicion something like that might occur. Not that it matters since you are a master of synthesis. Anyhow, our three brains were connected up by Hall to the monster spacial robot, and with the three of us working in unison the different controls responded flawlessly to our brain impressions, in fact far better than a natural body. We left the Earth secretly; father did not want a word to leak out until he'd brought back some proof. We crossed space at terrific speed, made the moon our first stopping place. We've never left here since."

THE girl's face hardened a little. She got up from her chair and crossed to the window, gazed out over the wilderness of machines.

"Do you realize," she asked slowly, "that these machines are *alive?*"

"Alive!" gasped Tanner. "But—but they can't be! No machine can actually be—"

"Maybe I put it badly," Kay acknowledged, turning again. "What I really mean is that the last Selenites defeated extinction in a fashion remarkably similar to father's idea. In the years I've been here I've picked up enough to know what they did.

"When they found that their world was falling to bits and that space-cold and airlessness was coming, they transferred their brains to machinery which would withstand the ravages of ultimate cold, and so they gained for themselves something approaching a mechanical immortality. A brain housed in a machine does not easily die because there is nothing to rapidly deteriorate—except the brain itself—and with no blood stream or other sources of impurity to impair it, it can—and does—last for tens of thousands of years. That is, on the moon here. I doubt if it could be done on Earth.

"Well, when we arrived here these machine brains trapped us entirely; they put some kind of electrical current round us that prevented *wanthorium* from working.

"Incidentally, where do the Selenites get all their power to do these things?" Perry demanded, gazing out on the steady activity of the machines' rods, bars and pistons.

"From the sun. The moon is peculiar in many ways, but its biggest asset is its power to absorb the unveiled rays of the sun—electrical waves, various types of radiation, and so forth. The moon is really a gigantic storage battery. Certain veins of rock are purely magnetic; special oxides retain the currents received from the sun.

"Those two huge electrodes up there were made by the machine Selenites for utilizing the constant supply of stored energy. All power and light is derived from there. Only on certain spots on

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the moon is the absorptive effect missing; it turns into reflective instead through some rock faults. You might call them blind spots. Those blind spots are the source of the bright streaks and rays which are visible at high lunar noon—full moon—from Earth."

"By which means, unless I miss my guess, you directed thought across the void?" Perry asked slowly.

"Yes, but it wasn't quite so easy as that. Those bright streaks and rays are the source of natural carrier waves to Earth, the nearest neighbor. The sun hurls forth radio waves among other things, and of terrific power. They strike the moon and are reflected from the blind spots out into space again. Naturally, a host of them hit the Earth. They can carry any particular radiation or transmission the Selenites desire—and they do. I'll tell you exactly what in a moment. Right now I'd better explain how my thoughts reached Earth.

"IT was blind chance, in the first place. The moment we realized we were trapped we tried to radio Earth, but the electric shield around our robot blocked the transmission. Finally we hit on another idea. Thought waves, of far shorter length than radio, got safely through the shield. We converted our radio apparatus into a thought wave transmitter—not very difficult since thought and radio waves are almost identical except for length. We directed our combined concentrations to the natural carrier beam on the surface, occurring every full moon.

"We kept it up at every full moon, through the years. We hoped finally to effect a radio set somewhere on Earth and get a message through. Our only chance in doing that lay in a radio set somewhere having the exact reception coils necessary. A mighty slim chance! If we did strike one, our instruments would reveal quickly enough that we were in contact. For years nothing happened."

The girl fell silent for a moment; then her eyes brightened.

"Then I suddenly realized that my particular concentrations had impacted on something and were being interpreted—but it wasn't a radio because my father's and mother's thoughts were not being received at all. Finally I worked out the reason. Somehow, a brain had come into being, a brain identical with my own. My every thought was functioning through a body, just as if I were a living being. It could only mean that by some chance an exact duplicate of myself, with an exactly duplicate brain had been created. How, or why, I did not know. The impulse to speak reacted perfectly and my image spoke in sympathy. You understand now?"

"Clearly enough," Perry nodded. "It was, in a sense telepathic remote control, the only difference in this case being that thought waves reacted instead of radio. Even though I can understand that, I do not understand why a brain alone should be the vital secret of life and living manifestation."

"It isn't!" the girl contradicted quickly. "A brain is the organ of thought interpretation. Thought is life; without it there can be no life. The actual source of thought is a mystery, unless it be the ether of space itself interpreted through individual brains—but the fact remains that so long as a brain can interpret thoughts it can make a body live. That was why your synthetic model of me did not live until it had a thinking brain inside it. You could not create thought, therefore not life. Remember the famous saying—'I think, therefore I live.'"

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PERRY was silent for a long time when the girl stopped talking. Then at last he said slowly, "I don't think I ever heard of a more ingenious way of sending for help."

Kay shrugged. "Without that one chance of you forming molecules and atoms identical to my original body I could never have done it. I have you to thank for real life, a real body, and —" She paused and sighed. "But there I go! We're not out of the woods yet by any means. From what I've learned of these Selenites, they are trying to get the Earth for their own uses. For generations they have tried to wipe out humanity with specially devised radiations. The only effect was, in certain cases, to produce lunacy among some individuals at full moon. That's an acknowledged fact, of course."

Perry smiled. "Of course. Hence the word 'lunatic'."

"Just after we got here the Selenites devised a new system of control, reacting directly on female brains, which are far more sensitive to ethereal changes than those of the male. Every living female, human, animal, insect, and so forth, was wiped out, was it not?"

"That was why I made you," Perry said bitterly.

"Humanity will die because it cannot procreate," Kay said pensively. "But the Selenites have still to conquer space travel. When we arrived here they realized the secret was in their grasp; but up to now we've resisted every attempt to make us divulge it. They undoubtedly hope to finally wear us out; that's why they've held us here. They have hopes too of finding some way to get hold of earthly bodies if they ever reach Earth. They want that more than anything else in the universe—to be rid of these encumbering machines they go about in. So as things stand, I guess it's stalemate."

CHAPTER VII

"We'll Give the Selenites Our Secret . . ."

A SILENCE fell on the little control room. Perry stood with his chin sunk on his chest. Tanner finally spoke.

"Queer, isn't it, that these machine people have allowed us to take Kay's brain from the robot without attacking us?"

The girl laughed shortly. "You'll probably find that they've got you here as firmly as the robot. Your controls will probably be dead."

"What!" Perry gasped, and swung to the control board.

The girl was right. The *wanthorium* plates failed to respond as the berylium shields slid to one side.

"There you are!" Kay sighed. "It's a neat way of keeping a prisoner. Fortunately the electric current doesn't affect flesh and blood; that's why we're all right—also why you could move me from the robot without any ill effects."

Tanner gave a grunt. "Now that we know everything we're no better off! The Earth is still devoid of women, and since it takes a living brain to give life to a synthetic model how the devil are we going to do it? In any case we're stuck here, and these damned machines will probably attack us before long."

"Only if you attack them," the girl put in quietly. "Stay passive, and you've nothing to fear."

"But we can't stay passive! We want action."

"Living brains— Synthetic models," Perry said suddenly, starting to pace up and down. "Let's get this thing straight. We have here a situation wherein two worlds are at loggerheads because they're both driven by desperate necessity to need something the other possesses. Miss Wancliffe, as I see

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it these Selenites want to take over the Earth so they can devise ways and means of having natural bodies again on a young world, without recourse to mechanical aid. Right?"

"Just that," Kay nodded.

"Hmmm. . . . Because they feared opposition they wiped out the female half of the human race, knowing the remainder would perish within a century?"

"Right again."

"They are scientists of a high order," Perry went on slowly, gazing thoughtfully in front of him. "Therefore they did not destroy through any vicious sense, but because it seemed to them the only method of gaining their end, even as a man might slay his favorite horse for meat if hunger drove him to it. That does not make him a devil at heart."

"What the hell are you driving at?" Tanner demanded bluntly.

Perry smiled faintly. "Way back in 1980, Earthlings finally learned that the surest means of lasting security is gained by arbitration. You remember the friendship over the world, the study of different nations' greatest needs? How there finally grew out of exchange and cooperation a bloodless and permanent world peace? Well, that taught every true man that violence is not the way to settle a difference. Cooperation is the secret. I'm trying to put those ideals into effect right here. Call me an ambassador or diplomat for Earth, if you like—but I think that right under my hands there lies the solution to both difficulties. It all depends how I work. These people are not vicious, otherwise they would have slain, or somehow destroyed the three-brained robot long ago and learned its secret. Instead they prefer to wait until it is given up through sheer necessity—"

"More likely because it's the only way they'll get it," Tanner snapped. "They'd never find that secret without being told, would they, Miss Wancliffe?"

"Unlikely," she confessed; and looked at Perry queerly. "What are you getting at?"

"Just this. The Selenites can't act without space travel. The human race cannot survive without female brains to be fitted to synthetic bodies. That isn't a mathematical puzzle— it's common sense. Suppose, in return for the secret of space travel the Selenites consented to have their brains—the female ones—fitted to synthetic earthly bodies? Our race would be saved."

"YOU'RE screwy!" Tanner shouted. "The Earth would be overrun with Selenites in no time. Lord! Think of the wars there'd be! It's playing right into their hands. Superscientific Selenites versus the last men of earth? Not darn likely!"

"Wars? No!" Perry shook his head firmly. "The moon was once part of the Earth. At root, Earthlings and Selenites are of the same basic protoplasm. They've evolved differently because of different planetary states, that's all. Superscience doesn't beget war, but progress."

"Yeah; like the slaughter of every woman on Earth, eh?" Tanner snapped.

"Science would call that necessary elimination." Perry paused, looked at Tanner and the girl each in turn. "Can't you *see*?" he demanded. "The Selenites will never discover *wanthorium* unless we give it to them, and we can't escape either. On the other hand, the human race can't survive unless Selenite brains are used. That's the top and bottom of the matter."

"Maybe you're right," admitted Kay, musing. "After all, they could advance Earthly knowledge enormously."

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"Exactly." Perry was smiling strangely. Tanner had a queer inner conviction that Perry had not told everything that was in his mind. He knew that enigmatic smile too well.

Perry swung suddenly to the girl.

"How does one communicate with these machine folk?" he asked briefly.

Turning, she pointed through the window to one particular machine composed of an enormous cylinder supported on two side trestles. It looked remarkably like a gigantic dictaphone. At the moment the cylinder was motionless.

"That's it, an electrical thought recorder," she said quietly. "It takes the impressions of thought waves on the drum, then by some process I don't propose to explain it changes your language into lunar by internal mathematical means, afterwards changing lunar back into English. That's what we've used to communicate."

"Do these machines read thoughts?" Perry asked anxiously.

"The machines themselves can't read thoughts—only the recorder can do that—and only then when you directly concentrate on your message."

"Good!" Perry's nod was distinctly relieved. He turned to the closet and took out his space suit. In a few minutes he was outside, standing before the strange machine. The drum was slowly rotating.

Tanner glanced at the girl by his side.

"I still don't like it," he muttered. "If you ask me anything, Perry's sealing the doom of Earth more certainly than it's sealed already."

"I wonder if he is . . ." The girl's eyes were thoughtful. "I trust him. After all he's done for me I'd trust him to the ends of the universe."

Tanner said nothing. He was frowning in perplexity.

PERRY spent an hour giving his message, and in the ensuing hour he did little save pace the control room anxiously completely ignoring the meal Tanner had prepared for the three of them. Time and again he went to the window, until at last he saw the waited sign—a long roll of metal ejected from the strange cylinder.

In minutes he was outside and in again, only paused long enough to take off his space suit helmet, then unrolled the metal message eagerly. For a moment he stared wonderingly at the faultless spelling and execution of the stylus indented message, then gave a whoop of joy as he read, Kay and Tanner staring over his shoulder.

"They agree!" he shouted exultantly. "They agree! Read for yourselves!"

They didn't need telling. The answer stared up at them.

"Your message has been received with interest by our people. We have debated the matter and have decided to accept your proposition. We realize that it would be impossible for you to provide us with bodies such as we used to have because you have no knowledge of the anatomy of lunar beings. Further, we realize that our construction on earthly lines is the only way for us to achieve ease on your planet.

"We wish you no ill—only our own advancement and the possession of bodies instead of imprisoning machines. We shall place ourselves in your hands, but as a safeguard during our synthetic construction on Earth we propose that our numbers should stand guard to prevent any possible deception. We trust you, but you cannot be answerable for the rest of your race.

"All we need is *Wanthorium*. In our machine bodies we can fly through space without ships. The fact

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that we shall keep faith with you is self evident, because we need earthly bodies more than anything else in the universe. In return for this, the secrets of lunar science will later be yours."

Perry laid the metal sheet on one side.

"Phooey!" growled Tanner. "They're all soft soap at the moment, but once they know space travel and have earth bodies they'll move around and wipe humanity off the Earth."

Perry smiled very slowly; it had a touch of grimness in it.

"That," he said quietly, "remains to be seen. For the time being, I trust 'em."

PERRY lost no time thereafter. He handed over the secret of *wanthorium* once he had gained the accordance of Dr. Wancliffe's imprisoned brain to his schemes. Thereafter, through several weeks, it was mainly a matter of watching the Selenites' incredibly advanced engineering machines manufacturing the stuff in infinite quantities, delicate machines fitting the stuff to the ten thousand Selenites present in the enormous underground cavern.

So far, the Selenites had kept faith. The time came at last to depart for Earth.

Perry himself led the exodus in his ship with Wancliffe's double brained robot immediately in the rear. Further behind, floating through the weird galleries of the moon, came the ten thousand Selenites in a disordered array of machinery.

Upward and outward into the blinding sunshine, into the depths of space, over the gulf to Earth and the American continent they went. The enormous Selenite army settled just outside New York, much to the consternation of Earthlings who imagined interstellar invasion was now added to their troubles.

Then Perry spoke over a world television hookup. Presidents, kings and dictators listened to him, scientists were on tenterhooks, surgeons were astounded.

"Upon the cooperation we can now give depends humanity's last hope of survival," Perry stated calmly to the battery of transmitters before him. "You have heard my plan, and it is the only feasible one. Every man with medical knowledge, every surgeon in the world, must come to New York. The Medical Institutes will be opened for our purposes. Men must be trained in the art of making synthetic beings—beings who will take on life when living lunar brains are transplanted into them. It may take years—years of grueling endeavor—but because so much hangs on it I know you will agree."

Perry was right in that. Mankind agreed everywhere, and New York saw an influx of medical experts such as the world had never known. Even President Gregory, a one time doctor, offered his services. And an added spurt was given to endeavor as armies of Selenite machine brains floated overhead almost ceaselessly, waiting, watching, prepared to strike without mercy at the first sign of an attempt to break faith.

But Perry and his enormous army of ever growing workers did not break faith. They wanted humanity to survive as badly as the Selenites wanted living bodies.

Through the months, enormous surgical laboratories sprouted in all directions. The whole world was concerned only in the making of synthetic men and women from Perry's original plans. Five thousand men and five thousand women—the women first by mutual agreement with the Selenites.

Perry himself concentrated first on re-creating the bodies of Elroid Wan-

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cliffe and his wife, was finally rewarded by seeing them living and well beside him, restored to the girl who had untiringly helped him through all his endeavors.

Tanner too had changed, was carried away with enthusiasm for the project, even though he still had inner doubts.

A year went by. Two years.... Five years....

Synthesis was everywhere. Day after day more and more brains were transferred to waiting bodies and the corresponding number of alert Selenite machine watchers grew correspondingly less—

Until at last the day arrived when every brain had been given an Earthly body. The last Selenite man mingled with Earthly people, along with the lunar men and women who had gone before him.

"I CAN'T for the life of me understand it!" declared Dr. Wancliffe, as he stood in the surgical laboratories surveying the report on the synthetic people's progress. "These men and women, virtually made from the test tube and possessing incredibly brilliant minds, are quite content to mate with each other. In several cases Earthmen have married lunar brained women—and the lunar women, though infinitely cleverer, have settled down to quiet domesticity. It beats me! You've restored the balance of the human race, Perry; it's only a question of time before the race picks up again, but—"

Wancliffe stopped and frowned. "Why the devil don't any of them try to seize power? That's what I expected."

"I thought the same," growled Tanner. "I'm ready for them to launch something dastardly any minute."

"So am I," murmured Kay, glancing across at Perry.

Perry smiled slowly, surveyed the assembled surgeons.

"In a few months the world will be back to normal," he said quietly. "Business will resume. Out there beyond New York is a vast field of machinery which contains all the secrets of lunar science we'll ever need to know. They can easily be analyzed. Those machines formerly housed brains, which are now in the bodies of synthetic earth men and women.

"The moon is totally devoid of life; all chance of threat from there has gone. I took a long chance, my friends, and it worked. These Selenites never had the power to read thoughts, therefore they never knew my innermost ideas. Further, their destruction of womankind *was* dastardly, though I said otherwise at the time to drive home my argument. I've turned the tables on them by using their womankind to repair our deficit."

"But *how?*" Wancliffe demanded. "They behave just like ordinary Earth women, and therefore—"

Perry held his hand up for silence, went on talking.

"The genius of a Selenite brain is only produced because the moon has a sixth of the Earth's gravity. When the Selenites were flesh and blood the lesser gravity permitted a fuller, clearer bloodstream to nourish their brains. Their brains became brilliant because they were fed by a perfect circulation that had but little gravitational drag to overcome.

"*But,* when they were given Earthly bodies they naturally had an Earthly gravity to contend with, and also an Earthly bloodstream which is nothing like so smooth as a Selenite's. The result is that the brains are not so well nourished, no longer capable of getting those vast ideas. They've been defeated by a biological fact. They'll never be clever again; they're *earthly!*"

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"Good Heavens!" Wancliffe breathed, staring at Perry blankly. "You're right! And to think nobody thought of it—"

"Why should they? It's the obvious thing that escapes notice."

Perry turned aside as the scientists gathered together to talk the matter over. He laid a strong hand on Kay's arm.

"Funny thing," he murmured. "I don't quite know whether I ought to ask your father's permission to marry you, or not. After all I created you. . . ."

"My body . . . yes," she agreed softly, "and my love I gave you from the first moment these synthetic eyes of mine saw you. Nor do I think anyone will question your title to both!"

For answer he clasped her to him and she felt him shudder slightly.

"Perry!" she uttered anxiously, "what is it?"

He answered slowly, thankfully, "It's just that I've realized for the first time how truly horrible is a world without women!"

THE END

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Valley Of

Invisible men fought beside him as Mar
Bradford battled to defend the Shinin
God from an unscrupulous Baltic agent.

CHAPTER I

In the Hidden Land

MARK BRADFORD ducked his head and threw up his arm to protect his eyes, as his big amphibian airplane dived toward the jungle-covered plateau.

Crash! With a rending of metal and splintering of branches, the ship smacked down into the brush-covered clearing he had chosen for his forced landing.

Then all was silent.

Mark groggily unfastened his safety belt, and clambered unsteadily out of the wrecked ship.

His dark, virile, strong-chinned face tightened and his black eyes narrowed as he surveyed the wreck.

"Well, I've reached the plateau of the Shining God, anyway," he told himself grimly. "But it's going to be a long eight-hundred mile walk back through the jungle."

His chunky, muscular khaki figure turned as he slowly surveyed the scene about him.

Huge trees, silk-cotton and jagua and jupati, rose around this brushy clearing. Through the trees, back a half mile to the north, he could glimpse the

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Invisible Men

By EDMOND HAMILTON

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rim of this plateau on which he had landed. Beyond and below the rim of the great plateau lay the solid green Brazilian jungle. Eight hundred miles of that jungle, between him and civilization!

For these were the unexplored jungles of the Matto Grosso, the unknown heart of wildest Brazil, the greatest blank spot left upon the maps of earth. For twenty hours he had been flying over that jungle, searching for this plateau. And he had found the plateau—just as his gas had run out!

Mark gazed southward, toward the center of the great plateau. Through the trees, he glimpsed a great blue lake, flashing in the sun. It was miles away, and the whole surface of the plateau appeared to slope gently down toward it.

He made out an island in the distant lake, a small mass of land that rose to a steep black peak. And he thought he could discern black structures of some kind on the lake's western shore.

"Goodbye, pal," he muttered to the wrecked airplane. "You brought me here—it's up to me, now, to get the Shining God and get out of here."

Rapidly he fished a revolver belt, a sun helmet, and a small pack out of the wrecked ship. Then he started on a steady tramp southward through the forest, toward the remote lake.

"At least," he told himself with grim satisfaction, "I seem to have beaten Hogrim and the others here. And that's good."

MARK BRADFORD was an agent of the United States War Department. And he had come into these unexplored Brazilian wilds, had sought out this mysterious plateau, to search for a tremendous secret.

The secret of *invisibility!*

A year before, an over-daring American prospector, a Francis Trask, had gone into this unknown region. Months later, Trask had floated in his canoe down the Tapajos to a trading post, dying of wounds, babbling deliriously of an incredible secret upon a mysterious plateau in the far interior.

"The Shining God!" Trask had raved as he died. "The Shining God that can make any matter invisible!"

Trask had died. But in his back, in a half-healed wound, had been found a thing that partly corroborated his ravings.

It was an invisible arrowhead. A copper arrowhead that had been somehow treated so that it was perfectly transparent to light, was absolutely invisible to the human eye. But it hadn't remained that way. It had gradually become opaque.

However, did the secret of invisibility, a secret that would make any country's armies and navies invincible, exist somewhere in the wilderness? It seemed possible. American defense chiefs had thought it possible—and had sent Mark Bradford to get that secret.

Mark had known that the agents of other countries were ahead of him, also seeking the invaluable secret. The Baltic Empire, that brutal, dictator-ruled land that had menaced the world's democracies for the last few years, had sent its renowned spy-chief, Joseph Hogrim.

Hogrim and the agents of other European nations had had a head start—for news of Trask's discovery had been sent first to Europe. Mark Bradford had tried to overcome their start on him by using an airplane in a desperately risky attempt to reach the plateau ahead of them. He had flown straight into the uncharted wilderness, had searched until he found the plateau. But by the time he found it, his gaso-

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line was exhausted.

Mark's dark, dynamic face was set in lines of grimmest determination as he slogged southward through the jungle now. If the Shining God, the secret of invisibility, actually existed here, he'd get it somehow—for America.

The jungle was silent around him, except for monkeys and parrots screeching through the high treetops. Hordes of pium and zancudo flies viciously attacked him. Sweat dripped from his face as he pushed resolutely toward the great lake.

He finally reached the strip of sandy beach between the jungle and the water. The blue, heaving surface stretched in front of him for a dozen miles. The island in the middle of the lake was half that far away from him, its steep black peak rising like a man-made monument.

Mark stooped in the sand and drank of the clear water. He was straightening up, when he froze rigid.

He was witnessing an incredible thing.

ALONG the sandy strip of beach, a jaguar was coming toward him. He could see clearly the imprints of its big cat-paws in the sand, as it stealthily approached.

But he couldn't see the beast that made those advancing paw-prints! A creature he couldn't see, a jaguar that was totally invisible, was stalking him!

Mark Bradford stared, transfixed. He saw the paw-prints of the invisible beast halt and deepen, a few yards away. He knew the jaguar was gathering itself to spring—

Then something flashed out of the jungle, through the air toward the invisible beast. It was a large rope net, that had been cast so that it settled unerringly around the unseen animal.

Instantly the invisible jaguar uttered a terrific, vibrating roar. It sought to free itself of the net but its wild efforts only enmeshed it more deeply. To Mark's stunned gaze, it was as though the rope net was bunching and tangling and squirming with life of its own.

"An invisible animal?" muttered Mark hoarsely, staring with sweat-glistening dark face wild.

A sudden surge of elation pumped exultantly through his blood.

"Then there *is* a secret of invisibility here! I've found the country of the Shining God!"

At that moment, something sharp and pointed prodded his back.

Mark Bradford broke from the spell-bound trance that had held him, and whirled around.

A dozen tall, brown-faced warriors in copper helmets and breastplates stood facing him, a few feet away. They had cast the net that had trapped the invisible jaguar, and then had slipped around silently onto the dazed young American.

These warriors had fierce, aquiline features, but they were not Indians. Their helmets and armor betokened a state of semi-civilization. They carried big bows, and on each bowstring was an arrow, pointed at Mark's heart.

One of them who appeared to be a captain wore a plume of brilliant feathers on his copper helmet, and carried a long copper sword with whose point he had pricked Mark's back.

He spoke harshly to Mark. The American stared. The man was speaking in Quichuan, that ancient language that was used over half South America, long before white men came.

"What do you here in the land of Krim, white stranger?" the captain demanded menacingly.

Mark gathered his dazed faculties. The pointing arrows showed him the

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deadly peril in which he stood.

"I came from outside this plateau," he said in Quichuan. "I was drinking here, when that invisible beast approached me—"

Mark Bradford, as he spoke, unobtrusively grasped the butt of his revolver. The fierce black eyes of the plumed captain saw the movement.

"Drop that thing," he ordered harshly.

Mark hesitated. But a dozen arrows poised on taut bowstrings, ready to flash into him. He couldn't escape them.

Slowly he let the revolver fall. He wondered how this barbaric warrior knew that it was a weapon.

"I am Juss, captain in the army of Groro, the king of Krim," the captain was saying. His fierce eyes slitted as he asked suddenly, "Did you come to this land of Krim to seek for the Shining God?"

Mark felt renewed elation. He was right—this was where Trask had found the Shining God, the thing that could make any matter invisible.

But Mark masked his elation. The Shining God was probably a sacred thing to these people, whatever it was. He must proceed carefully.

"No, I know nothing of any Shining God," he answered. "I am in this land only because I was lost and wandered here."

"I think you lie," said the captain Juss savagely. "You shall go with us to the city Krim, where the king Groro shall judge you."

He turned to his fierce, watchful warriors and spoke to four of them in rapid Quichuan, pointing as he spoke toward the invisible jaguar that was still threshing and snarling furiously in the meshes of the net.

"Bring the beast," Juss ordered them. "The rest of us return to Krim at once, with this captive."

Then he pointed south along the lake shore with his copper sword. "March!" he ordered Mark harshly.

Mark Bradford knew it was death to disobey the command. And he didn't want to disobey. The Shining God, the great secret, probably lay in that city Krim they talked of.

So he moved on along the narrow beach. The captain Juss himself led the way, and eight of his copper-armored men followed, on either side of the American, arrows on their bowstrings ready to shoot him down. The other four warriors had remained behind, were gingerly approaching the trapped, invisible jaguar.

FOR almost an hour, Mark and his escort followed the narrow strip of beach between the jungle and lake. Far out to their left in the blue water brooded the steep black island. And miles ahead lay the black city Mark had glimpsed on the shore.

The city Krim's black mass covered several square miles, and abutted directly on the lake. Its high sea-wall was broken at one place by stone docks fringed with moored canoes. On the land side of the city, cultivated fields and pastures for grazing herds had been hacked from the solid jungle.

Krim was a *monolithic* city! A huge mass of solid black rock outcropped here by the lake edge, and the solid stone had been carved long ago by incalculable labor into several thousand buildings of one or two stories, with flat roofs.

Two great structures dominated the black city. One was a bowl-shaped amphitheater like a small football stadium. The other was a squat tower of several stories, a brutal black monolith that frowned across the city toward the lake.

"The palace of Groro, the King,"

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rasped Juss, nodding toward the black tower. "We go there."

The Krimian populace in the black streets stared wonderingly at Mark Bradford as the archers conducted him through the monolithic city.

There were thousands of the people, all brown-skinned, aquiline featured. Most were workers or peasants dressed in white linen tunics, but there were very many of the copper-armored soldiers.

Guards at the entrance of the squat monolithic palace clashed copper spears in salute as Juss and his warriors entered the building with the American. Mark found himself in a great, shadowy stone hall, a dusky audience chamber.

Groro, the ruler of Krim, sat on a dais at the end of the room, giving orders in a loud voice to two obsequious men. He was a giant of a man, bull-framed and bull-thewed. Under his copper helmet, his brutal, massive brown face lowered at Mark Bradford in a frown of surprise.

"A white stranger we took captive by the north shore of the lake, Highness!" announced Juss. "My hunting party was trailing a jaguar of the Korlu, when we found him."

"By the shore?" roared Groro, his tawny eyes glaring suddenly at Mark. "What were you doing there, stranger? Were you planning to go out to the island of the Korlu?"

Mark Bradford didn't hear him. The young American was staring rigidly at a man who stood beside Groro.

It was another white man! A stocky, fat-necked man in a khaki suit, with a coarse red face out of which little, pig-like black eyes stared surprisedly at Mark.

Then the piggish, cunning eyes filled with mirth, as the man broke into a shout of throaty laughter.

"Bradford, of the American secret service!" he exclaimed, guffawing. "I've been expecting you to turn up, for days. What detained you?"

"Joseph Hogrim!" Mark exclaimed, staring unbelievingly at the stocky, mockingly grinning red face.

All Mark's hopes plummeted to earth. Hogrim, the agent of the Baltic Empire, had beaten him here to the plateau, after all. Had beaten him to the secret of invisibility!

CHAPTER II

Daughter of the Korlu

SICK with the feeling of defeat, Mark Bradford stared at Hogrim's mocking face, at the porcine little eyes twinkling at him in openly gloating triumph.

Hogrim, the agent of the great Baltic Empire, that ruthless dictatorship that menaced all the world! Hogrim had beaten him! The American couldn't get over it.

"It is sad, of course," mocked Hogrim, "to find yourself outwitted. But the race is to the swift, friend Bradford. I started for here a month ago, when word of the man Trask's discovery first reached my government."

"Then you have the Shining God—the secret?" Mark asked. The words seemed to stick in his throat.

"Not yet, but I soon will have, with the help of my good friend Groro," answered Joseph Hogrim.

Mark's spirits rebounded a little. If Hogrim didn't already have the secret of invisibility in his possession, there was still a chance for him—for America!

"Don't feed yourself with false hopes, though," chuckled Hogrim as he saw the flash in Mark's black eyes. "You, I fear, are not going to live very long."

Groro, the giant king of the people of Krim, was stirring restively at this

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exchange in English. The bull-framed ruler spoke impatiently now, in the Quichuan.

"This new white stranger—he is not a friend of yours, then?" he demanded of Hogrim.

"No, he is an enemy, like the others," Joseph Hogrim answered quickly. "He came here to get the Shining God for himself."

Groro uttered a roar of rage and sprang to his feet, glaring furiously down at Mark Bradford.

"So you seek the Shining God for yourself?" he bellowed at the American. "Such presumption merits dreadful death. The God is not for outlanders like you—it is for us Krimians, and soon we shall possess it."

Mark began to understand a little. The Shining God, the thing that could make matter invisible, was not here in Krim. These Krimians wanted it—but didn't have it.

Where was it, then? He couldn't guess. But he did guess that Hogrim had played upon Groro's desire for the God, to make an ally of the giant barbarian king.

"That man will betray you, though he poses now as your ally," Mark Bradford rasped to the king, pointing at Joseph Hogrim. "He too seeks the God only for himself."

"Lies," said Hogrim calmly to the enraged ruler. "The lies of an enemy seeking to destroy me. You know, Highness, that I promised you my help in getting the God for yourself. I want nothing of it."

"I know that, yes," roared Groro. "And I shall devise a fitting death for this dog of a stranger who dares accuse you, my friend and ally."

The furious ruler called to the fierce-eyed captain, Juss.

"Take him down and put him with the two other outlanders and the girl," he roared, pointing at Mark. "Tomorrow night are the Games of the Full Moon. We shall see him die in proper fashion, then."

Joseph Hogrim guffawed as the keen sword of Juss prodded Mark away, the officer's archers following.

"You'll find friends down there to welcome you, friend Bradford!" the Baltic spy called mockingly.

WHAT did that mean? Mark wondered, as he was pushed across the huge audience chamber by the watchful guards.

The Krimian warriors took him through shadowy corridors, to a stair that led downward. Mark descended stone steps worn by the ages, through a darkness relieved only by an occasional beam of sunlight from some loophole window.

Down into a labyrinth of dusky passages and rooms under the palace, he went. All these stairs and walls and corridors were monolithic, carved like the whole city out of solid rock. Again Mark marveled at the tremendous labor. How could a semi-civilized race like these Krimians have achieved it?

He was halted in front of a heavy wooden door, fastened by a strong copper lock. A squat, brutal-faced warrior came along the hall and with one of the keys jangling from his belt, unlocked the door.

"See that he is well fastened, Rucho," snapped Juss to this squat jailor.

"He shall be well secured," vowed the jailor Rucho with a brutish laugh. "You will find him here with the others when you want him."

Merciless spear-points prodded Mark through the door into a dark, small and musty stone cell. His eyes could only dimly make out its interior. He perceived two men, fastened to the stone wall by chains and locked shackles on

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their legs.

Mark Bradford was roughly pushed to the stone floor. The spears of Juss' warriors covered him while the squat jailor Rucho locked a shackle around his ankle. Then Juss and his men and the jailor left the dusky room.

With a grating rasp, the door was locked on the outside.

"*Dieu*, another white man!" exclaimed an astonished voice beside Mark.

"So it seems," drawled a second voice coolly. "Just who are you, old chap?"

Mark Bradford turned astonishingly in his chains. Now his eyes, accustoming themselves to the semi-darkness, made out the faces of the other two prisoners.

They were both white men. One was a trim, wiry, compact little man with sleek black hair and a neat little black mustache, his keen eyes incredulously peering at Mark.

The other shackled man was lanky and blond, with a cool, handsome face and unperturbed gray eyes. But his left leg was bound with a rude bandage clotted with dried blood, and there were lines of suffering around his eyes.

"I've seen *you* before!" Mark burst to the lanky, wounded blond man. "You're Peter Crellys, a lieutenant in the Royal Air Force! Last year at Jamaica I saw you—"

"Right the first time," drawled the Englishman. "Except that I was given leave from the R.A.F. a month ago, for special duty."

"You're the agent that England sent here to look for the Shining God!" Mark Bradford cried, his dark face tightening.

Crellys shrugged. "It's so obvious there's no use in denying it, Yank. You *are* an American, aren't you?"

Mark nodded bitterly. "An American agent sent here on the same mission as yourself." He named himself.

"Ha, that makes us *le trois mosquetaires!*" exclaimed the dapper, mustached little man. "For I, Etienne Moreau, was sent to this cursed place by France for the same reason. And that swine Hogrim had beaten me here, and he had that barbarian Groro throw me into this filthy hole, two weeks ago."

"That's my story, too," Peter Crellys told Mark ruefully. "Only I didn't reach the plateau until five days ago. I walked right into Krim, like a fool, never dreaming that Joseph Hogrim was ahead of me. But he was, and when Groro's warriors jumped me, I tried to put up a fight—and got a stab in the leg."

"Why didn't Hogrim have us all killed right away, instead of prisoning us?" Mark wondered.

"Groro wouldn't have it," Crellys drawled. "These Krimian birds have a custom of keeping any captives until a festive affair known as the Games of the Full Moon. I gather that said captives meet a pretty sticky end then, over in that big stadium."

AT that moment Mark was unutterably startled by a soft voice that spoke out of the shadows at his side. It was a girl's voice, speaking in Quichuan.

"I do not understand your talk, Crellee," it complained. "Who is this new prisoner?"

Mark whirled around. That voice had come from right beside him. But there was no one else in the cell.

"What in the devil—" he gasped.

Crellys' pain-drawn face grinned at him.

"It's only Lua," said the Englishman.

"But there's nobody here!" Mark cried bewilderedly. "There's—"

The words froze on his lips. His

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spine went cold, his hair lifted, at the thing he now perceived.

A chain and shackle hung from the stone wall beside him, and he had seen when he entered that they were empty.

But now that shackle and chain were moving!

Mark reached out a hand toward the weirdly stirring chain. His fingers touched warm, resilient flesh—invisible flesh!

He had touched a naked, rounded shoulder. As his fingers numbly moved, he felt beneath them the rough texture of primitive leather clothes.

An invisible girl—here in chains beside him!

"My God, this is impossible" he cried wildly. "A girl that I can't see—"

"It's Lua," Crellys repeated. "She's one of the Korlu, the invisible people."

"Invisible *people?*" ejaculated Mark Bradford.

The Englishman nodded. "There are several thousand of them, Bradford. They live out on that island in the lake. And that is where the thing we all came for lies—the Shining God."

"An invisible people—an invisible girl—Lord, it's too insane!" gasped Mark. "I still can't believe it."

His hand was still touching the warm body of the unseen girl. He could feel the smooth skin and firm muscles. As he moved exploring fingers, he found that Lua wore a short tunic, that ended halfway down her slim thighs. The garment was as invisible as the girl herself.

Stunnedly, Mark touched the unseen girl's head. He felt soft, silky hair, falling to her shoulders, bound by an unseen metal fillet. And his finger-tips brushed a low, broad forehead, a cleanly chiseled nose, soft, full lips, and a stubborn little chin.

Yet he couldn't see her at all! As far as his eyes told him, he was merely feeling the empty air. It was uncanny, against all human experience.

"An invisible people?" Mark repeated incoherently. "It's not possible—yet at that, it's no more impossible than the invisible jaguar that stalked me on the beach."

"You met an invisible jaguar?" Lua cried quickly. "What happened to it?"

"Why, the Krimian warriors who captured me, captured it also, in a net," Mark said.

"They captured my Kuro?" cried the unseen girl wrathfully.

"*Your* Kuro?" Mark repeated incredulously. "Do you mean that that beast was a pet of yours?"

"Yes," affirmed Lua. "On our island, we Korlu raise the jaguars from birth, to help us defend ourselves against the warriors of Krim. And Kuro was my own jaguar, my companion and pet. He came with me to the mainland here four nights ago, when I came hither to search for my missing brother.

"I could not find my brother," the invisible girl continued, "and I fell into a pit-trap laid by the Krimians for us. When the warriors captured me and brought me here, Kuro ran away, and I hoped he could swim back to the island."

"The Krimians didn't kill him, they only captured him," Mark consoled her. But Lua's voice was sad.

"They will kill him in some horrible way, I know."

AFTER a moment the invisible girl asked Mark curiously, "What is your name, stranger?" She added naively, "I like your face."

"You have made a conquest, *mon ami.*" Etienne Moreau told Mark smilingly.

"Then you can see me, Lua?" Mark exclaimed to the girl. "You're invisible yourself, yet you can see?"

"Of course—why not?"

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"I can't understand it," Mark told the others puzzledly. "The scientists who examined that invisible arrowhead from Trask's body said that it was invisible because the frequency of vibration of its atoms had been stepped up to such a point that light-rays slide *between* the atoms of it."

Crellys nodded. "That's the secret of this invisibility—an increase in the pitch of atomic vibration. The Shining God, whatever it is, is undoubtedly the source of some energy that can cause such an increase in atomic frequency."

"But if the light-rays slide between the atoms of Lua's eye-retinas, how can she see?" Mark demanded.

"I never thought of that!" exclaimed Moreau.

"I have," Peter Crellys said thoughtfully, "and I think I understand the reason. The light that slides between the atoms of the retinas is able to *induce* a reaction in their sensitive substance, just as one charged wire can induce a current in another without actual contact. So these Korlu are able to see."

"That seems possible, when you think of it," Mark said slowly. He asked the girl, "You Korlu are not invisible from birth, are you?"

"No, Mark, we are not born so," Lua told him. Her voice hardened with hate as she added, "It was the attacks of the Krim, the barbaric brown warriors from outside, that long ago drove us Korlu to refuge of invisibility.

"We Korlu," she continued, "are a white race, not brown like the Krimians. Thousands of years ago we came to this plateau from the east, from a land that had sunk beneath the sea, and of which we were survivors. We built this city here, by carving the vast outcrop of black rock we found here into a monolithic city.

"Soon we discovered the existence of the Shining God, the wonderful, radiant thing that exists in the mountain on the island in the lake. With awe and reverence we worshipped the Shining God. For we perceived that it had the power to make any matter invisible, yes, even our own bodies. But we did not then make ourselves invisible, for we preferred to be able to see each other, and not to be like phantoms.

"Then, after long centuries of peace here, the Krimians came into this land. They came from the west, a marching host of fierce brown warriors who scaled the plateau and who attacked us, and finally drove us from this city. We Korlu had to take refuge on the island in the lake, where was our shining deity.

"But the Krimians attacked us even on the island, and sought to exterminate us. Only then, to save ourselves, did we Korlu avail ourselves of the power of the Shining God, and make ourselves invisible. Yes, and we made our clothing and our weapons and our tame jaguars and all else invisible, too.

"Since then, we have been able to repel the ceaseless Krimian attacks on our island. For these brown barbarians have never ceased to attack us.

"Always, up till now, have we Korlu been able to resist them. But now my people fear. For we have heard that the white stranger who came here last moon, the red-faced one, is devising a way for Groro to overcome us. We do not know what new weapon he is devising, but we know that if it succeeds, Groro will slay us to the last one and then will be the possessor of the sacred radiance, the Shining God."

CHAPTER III

The Games of the Full Moon

THE throbbing voice of the invisible girl ceased, and there was a taut silence in the dusky dungeon.

"That's the story, Bradford," said

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Peter Crellys finally, his handsome blond face drawn. "Hogrim is preparing something by which Groro and his warriors can conquer the Korlu and get the Shining God."

"Yes, and when they get *le Dieu Radiante,*" burst Etienne Moreau, his mustache quivering with indignation, "that devil of a Hogrim will somehow sneak it away from these brown warriors and take it back to his master, to the Baltic Empire."

"And you know what that means," Crellys said tightly. "A power like that, the power of invisibility, in the hands of that crazy dictator! Invisible airplanes bombing cities, invisible tanks and soldiers attacking all frontiers—a madman using that power to crush the world's democracies!"

Mark Bradford leaped tormentedly to his feet, the chain attached to his shackle rattling harshly.

"No, that won't happen!" he cried. "It *mustn't* happen! We've got to smash Hogrim's schemes, somehow."

"Do you agree that we three form an *Entente Cordiale,* then?" Moreau asked keenly. "To keep Hogrim from getting the secret?"

"I'm in favor of it," Crellys said instantly. "We three are representatives of the last three great democracies on earth. We ought to work together."

"I'm with you!" Mark declared. "If we queer Hogrim's plans, keep him from getting the God, we'll have saved our countries from a terrible danger. It doesn't matter so much whether we get the secret ourselves, for our countries are in no danger unless the Baltic Empire gets a weapon like this."

Their hands met in a firm grip. The soft, complaining voice of Lua broke in upon them.

"I do not understand your talk," she said. "Are you planning an escape from here? There is no escape."

Mark Bradford patted her warm, unseen shoulder reassuringly.

"We'll escape all right—somehow," he declared with grim determination.

"Easier said than done," drawled Crellys wearily. "Tomorrow night's a big occasion for us, you know—the Games of the Full Moon, when we get scragged in that arena."

"To think that I, a citizen of France, should be butchered to make a Roman holiday!" Moreau exclaimed.

"Not a Roman, but a Krimian holiday," corrected Crellys, a faint grin on his pain-drawn face.

"It is the same," sputtered the little Frenchman. "Ah, but they shall be fooled. You shall see. I, Etienne Moreau, shall disappoint these bloodthirsty barbarians."

"Talk won't do it," Mark snapped. "Let's try to get these shackles off. Maybe we can pick the locks."

"We've been trying that for days," Peter Crellys told him hopelesly.

Mark bent to the task, however. With the tongue of his belt-buckle he endeavored to pick the lock of the heavy shackle that was fastened around Lua's slim, invisible ankle.

"If we could get Lua free," he muttered as he worked, "she could help us a lot, invisible as she is."

But the lock had been cunningly contrived. It resisted his efforts. And finally he was forced to give up.

Crellys had sunk back against the stone wall, his eyes closed, his handsome face twisted in harsh lines of pain from the throbbing agony of his wounded leg.

Etienne Moreau too had lain back and seemed dozing, muttering dire threats in inaudible French as he dreamed.

THE single ray of light from the loophole window of the cell faded. Darkness reigned complete, save for a

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thin ray of white moonlight. Down here in the dungeons of the palace, nothing could be heard but occasional passage of heavy feet as Rucho, the jailer, went down the corridor.

"Mark, I will not be so afraid to die in the games tomorrow night, with you three beside me," Lua said softly.

The girl was close against him, her breath on his cheek.

Mark put his arm around her slim shoulders. She snuggled close to him, her soft hair against his face, as though seeking reassurance from him. An invisible girl—but a warm, breathing, frightened one.

"You're not going to die in those games, Lua, if I can help it," Mark told her determinedly. "Somehow we'll find a way to get out of here and smash Hogrim's hellish schemes."

"Yet I fear for my people," Lua whispered. "Yes, I fear the time has come at last when the warriors of Krim will overcome my people, and possess the sacred God."

"And that will mean doom not only for your people, but for mine also, for all the world's democracies," Mark said bitterly. "If Hogrim gets the God—"

He sat brooding on that dark prospect, mechanically twisting the little diamond ring on his finger, as was his habit during moments of abstraction.

After a time, he heard the regular breathing of Lua and knew she was asleep. He dozed himself, with the warm body of the invisible girl snuggled against him.

When dawn came, a ray of bright sun stabbing through the loophole window, Rucho, the jailer, entered the cell. Being careful to remain out of reach of the four shackled prisoners, he set down bowls of cooked vegetables and water.

"Eat and gain strength," the brutal-faced Krimian chuckled to them. "You will need it in the Games tonight."

But Lua would not eat.

"The food of the Krimians would be visible within me," the girl said. "And that might spoil any chance I have of helping us escape."

"I never thought of that!" Mark exclaimed. "Then you Korlu must always be partly visible by the food you eat, before your bodies assimilate it?"

"No, Mark," the unseen girl told him. "We consecrate our food to the Shining God, so that it too is invisible before we eat it. Otherwise, we would not be completely invisible."

THROUGH that long, hot day in the dusky dungeon cell, Mark Bradford racked his brain for a way of escape. He picked for hours at the shackle-locks, without opening them. Finally he gave it up.

"There's only one chance—to make a break for it, as they take us to the arena," he said grimly.

"And that," Peter Crelly's stated calmly, "will be useless. But we'll do it."

The ray of sunlight from the window crept slowly around the cell, then faded and died. And presently a brilliant white beam from the rising moon replaced it.

"It will not be long now," Lua said.

Almost with her words, there was a tramp of feet in the corridor, and the door swung open.

Juss, the captain who had captured Mark, entered with Rucho and a half-score soldiers with drawn swords.

"The Games are about to begin," said Juss; and added with grim humor, "We do not want you to miss them."

New shackles and chains were locked upon their legs before the old ones were unlocked. The armed soldiers held the ends of the new chains, and Juss kept his copper sword pressed against Lua's invisible back.

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They were herded thus toward the door and out into the hall. But Peter Crellys had been left in his chains in the cell.

"What about me?" called the wounded Englishman.

"You shall live until the next Games," Juss told him. "A crippled man would not furnish good sport."

"Yes, yes," chuckled Rucho wickedly. "I shall have him sound and strong by the next Games, trust me."

"Goodbye, Crellys," Mark said tightly. "And if we cash out tonight—good luck to you."

"*Oui*, and if you live long enough to get a chance, be sure to kill that devil Hogrim!" exclaimed Etienne Moreau fierily.

Lua pressed beside Mark Bradford as they were marched along the corridor, their chains clanking, the other ends of them still held by the armed Krimians. He could feel the invisible girl trembling, and pressed her arm reassuringly.

They did not go up into the palace. Instead, they were led on through a labyrinth of tunnels in the solid black rock. The whole vast mass out of which Krim had been carved was honeycombed at this depth with branching passages.

Torchlight of flares held by their guards flickered through the passages ahead of them. Presently as they advanced, they glimpsed a barred door ahead, beyond which lay a great space as bright as day with moonlight. They heard a dim roar of thousands of voices from out there.

"The arena," Juss told them grimly. "You wait here—each goes to the Games in turn."

As they were halted, Mark Bradford made the break for which he had been tensing all along the way.

He lashed out with a hard fist that sent one of the Krimian guards sprawling. As the man fell, Mark snatched away his sword, and struck viciously at Juss with it.

The fierce-eyed captain dodged back, and yelled in alarm. Mark leaped forward, dragging his heavy chain. His sword stabbed the throat of the warrior holding Lua's chain.

Moreau had waded into the battle, and with his chain had knocked out another warrior. But then the other Krimians poured onto the three captives.

"Do not kill them!" Juss shouted. "We must not spoil the Games!"

Mark got the copper sword into another warrior, and shouted for Lua to run. Then the flat of a blade crashed against his temple, and as he staggered, he was smothered by a weight of leaping brown bodies.

It was over in a minute. Chained as she was, Lua had had no chance to escape. And Moreau, spluttering wild Gallic curses, had been gripped and held by two warriors.

MARK'S head was bleeding from the blow that had felled him, and his black eyes were blazing in the torchlight as he was hauled to his feet.

"You shall pay for this in a moment, stranger," Juss hissed, glaring his hate at the American.

"Couldn't—do it," panted Mark to his two fellow-captives. "It's no use."

"Ah, if I had a regiment of poilus to clear out this devil's nest!" raved the Frenchman in his rage.

"You bleed, Mark!" exclaimed Lua distressedly, touching his streaming temple.

He heard the rip of cloth, as she tore a strip from her invisible tunic. And the unseen bit of cloth was deftly bound around his head by her equally unseen hands.

Mark held her close to him for a moment, his hand touching the soft, silky

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hair he could not see.

"You're a swell kid, Lua," he said thickly, "even if no one can see you. It's too bad things have got to end like this."

The dim roar of voices out in the moonlit amphitheater was suddenly broken by a loud blast of shrill horns.

"The signal for the first victim!" Juss exclaimed. He pointed to Mark. "He goes first!"

Six warriors dragged Mark roughly toward the barred door. It swung open, and he glimpsed a great space of brightly moonlit sand outside it.

His shackle was unlocked, and taken off him. Then he was given a violent push outward. He tumbled in the sand, a few yards outside the barred door. As he picked himself up, Juss tossed a copper sword out to him, and then closed the barred gate with a slam and locked it from inside.

"Defend yourself now, stranger!" called the Krimian captain mockingly. "You must needs be wary!"

Mark picked up the sword. Then as he straightened, an excited roar of thousands of voices beat on him.

He looked up. He stood in moonlight as bright as day, in the sand-covered arena of the Games.

Around him in the brilliant silver light rose the walls of the arena, thirty-foot stone walls no man or beast could jump. And above them slanted back the circular rows of stone seats of the great ampitheater.

Those seats were crowded now with all the people of Krim, many thousands of men and women in the white garments of artisans or the copper armor of soldiers. A fierce, barbaric audience, roaring excitedly at the sight of the young American who was to be the first victim in the Games.

Mark Bradford now saw, almost directly above him in the ampitheater, a raised stone platform upon which sat Groro, the bull-framed king of Krim. Guards whose copper armor flashed in the moon were ranked around him.

And beside the giant, glaring king stood Joseph Hogrim. The agent of the Baltic Empire was leaning forward, his little eyes glittering in the moonlight as he peered down at Mark Bradford.

"A pagan scene, is it not, friend Bradford?" mocked Hogrim's throaty voice, chuckling. "But in a moment, I fear, you won't be able to appreciate its color. Something very special has been prepared for you."

Groro raised his great hand. "Let the beast forth!" he bellowed.

Shrill horns sounded again. And a barred grating at the opposite side of the arena was raised.

The audience watched that opening, every head in the brilliant moonlight turned toward it. Then a great shout roared from the populace.

"The jaguar!"

MARK BRADFORD'S blood chilled. He was to fight a jaguar, then, with only this copper sword? Desperately he gripped the weapon, watching the opening across the arena.

But nothing came out of that opening! Mark felt bewildered. Then the blood suddenly drove from his heart, he felt ice congeal in his veins, as he looked across the arena.

Tracks were magically appearing in the moonlit sand, advancing toward him! Great paw-prints, one after the other, approaching him slowly, made as though by a phantom beast.

"God above!" muttered Mark thickly, as horrible remembrance rushed into his mind.

He was to fight an *invisible* jaguar! The same fierce, unseen beast that had stalked him on the beach, and which he had seen Juss and his warriors capture.

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Mark stared at the advancing paw-prints, like a bird fascinated by the eyes of a snake. He knew that he had not one chance in a million against this beast that he could not see. Yet as the paw-prints advanced magically in the moonlight, he raised his puny sword, his eyes wild.

He seemed trapped in a nightmare scene. The brilliant full moon shining gloriously in the starred sky above, bathing with its rich light the huge amphitheater, the vast, tensely watching throng, the silver sand upon which those footprints of the invisible beast came steadily toward him.

"Goodbye, friend Bradford!" came Joseph Hogrim's mocking call, from above and behind him.

The paw-prints had halted, ten feet away, Mark could almost *see* the great beast bunching to spring.

Then fine sand flew up from the tracks as the invisible animal launched through the air at him.

Mark met its rush with sword raised, stabbing furiously at the thing he could not see.

His sword missed, and a heavy body hurtled against him and knocked him sprawling as he dodged. He rolled frantically on the sand, trying to scramble to his feet.

But great, invisible paws dug into his shoulders as the unseen jaguar whirled and leaped on him, pinning him down. A terrific snarl broke on his ears, and he felt the hot, fetid breath of the creature on his face, as its jaws opened to seize his throat.

CHAPTER IV

The Fight on the Lake

A THOUSAND things flashed through Mark Bradford's brain as he waited for the invisible jaws of the huge, unseen beast to close upon his throat. He was still struggling mechanically, but the great paws of the jaguar held him down like a helpless puppet.

He could dimly hear, like the roar of a distant surf, the roaring of the people of Krim as they saw him flattened by his unseen antagonist. He wished with a flash of bitterness that he could take them all to death with him.

The jaguar's fangs did not sink into his throat! Something had stayed the unseen beast's attack. It was still holding him down with its great paws, but it was sniffing now at his head, growling puzzledly.

And suddenly Mark understood. The strip of cloth from Lua's tunic, which the invisible girl had bound around his bleeding forehead. *That* was what the jaguar was sniffing! This was Kuro, the girl's pet and companion, and its keen nostrils had caught her scent in that strip of cloth.

Mark lay waiting in an agony of apprehension. Would that scent be enough to keep the invisible beast from killing him? It seemed incredible, yet still the jaguar had not bitten. It was still sniffing, still growling deep in its throat, a perplexed, cat-like whine.

"The man is dead—catch the beast and return it to its cage!" came the bull-voiced order of Groro.

Mark, as he lay prone under the great animal's paws, glimpsed the barred door in the arena wall opening, the same door from which he had been thrust out to die.

Juss and his Krimian warriors emerged from the opening, holding a big net in front of them, cautiously advancing to trap again the invisible beast which they supposed had killed the prostrate American.

The jaguar whirled from Mark's body and faced the advancing men. Instantly Mark jumped to his feet.

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"Lua!" he cried to the jaguar. "Lua is there!"

And he dashed forward at the astounded warriors who had thought him dead.

It was a mad chance Mark was taking—a chance that Lua's name would be enough to spur the unseen beast to action.

But it succeeded—perhaps because by this time the jaguar had caught the distant scent of its mistress.

"Back—the beast springs!" screamed Juss.

At that moment, the captain and two of his men were smitten by an invisible force that hurled them headlong. And then the panic-stricken, screaming warriors seemed the center of a whirlwind.

The unseen jaguar, Kuro, was striking lightning blows to right and left, its huge paws tearing men to ribbons, who seemed attacked by nothing at all. A ghastly sight was that slaughter under the brilliant moon.

"Kuro!" cried a thin, distant voice, that of Lua.

The surviving warriors were running screeching for their lives. The amphitheater was in uproar, and Groro's great voice was shouting ragingly to his warriors.

MARK BRADFORD stooped and snatched the shackle-keys that hung at the belt of the mangled Juss. He rushed across the sand toward the opening of the barred door.

Kuro was running ahead of him, for he glimpsed the invisible beast's pawprints in the sand. Arrows flashed down from above as Groro's guards shot at Mark.

The arrows missed him—and then Mark was inside the torchlit rock tunnel. Two warriors there were smitten down by terrific slashes of the unseen jaguar's paws, as Mark burst in. Moreau shrank terrifiedly against the wall.

Then he heard Lua's throbbing cry of joy, and saw the chain of the invisible girl move swiftly.

"Kuro!" she was crying.

He heard a deep whine, and knew that the invisible girl was caressing the unseen beast.

"*Dieu,* what happened out there?" Moreau was crying incoherently. "What—"

"I'll explain later—we've a chance to escape now!" Mark shouted. "I've the keys!"

He bent to Lua's shackle. As he fumbled it with the keys, the unseen jaguar growled menacingly.

"Silence, Kuro!" commanded the girl tensely. "These are friends!"

The shackle clicked open, the chain fell off the girl's invisible ankle. But as Mark sprang to Moreau, he heard a clank of armor and fierce cries, from the tunnels.

"Warriors come!" cried Lua.

"One more minute—," panted Mark.

Now he had the shackle off Moreau, too. The little Frenchman snatched up a dead warrior's sword and stood, eyes blazing in the torchlight, mustache twitching.

"Which way?" he cried. "We must get back to Crellys and set him free."

"We cannot!" cried Lua's voice close beside Mark. "See, the warriors are between us and the dungeons. If we go that way, it is death—but if we escape, we can come back later for Crellee!"

"She's right!" Mark exclaimed. "We'll ruin Crellys' chances and our own too if we're trapped here."

Torchlight was flickering strongly along the tunnels now, and the shout of advancing warriors was nearer.

"This way!" Mark cried, leaping toward a dark tunnel-mouth that opened a little back along the passage.

They followed, and in a moment all

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were running along an absolutely lightless corridor hollowed out of the solid rock.

THE uproar behind them died out, and they moved through a silence like that of the tomb. Blindly, without sense of direction, they hastened on through the labyrinth of passages that honeycombed the solid rock foundation of Krim.

"They'll comb all these tunnels—trap us quickly if we don't get out of here," Mark warned.

"We must get to the lake—escape to my people, the Korlu, on our island," Lua exclaimed. "There you will be safe, for a time at least."

"We can perhaps do it if we can get out of these ratholes to the waterfront and steal a canoe," Mark said tensely. "But which way lies the lake?"

"Heaven knows!" exclaimed Moreau baffledly. "These *sacred* passages are all alike, to me."

Lua stopped in the darkness, so that Mark bumped into her.

"Kuro can lead us!" she exclaimed with a thrill of hope in her voice. "He has senses that we have not."

Mark felt her bend down and call the jaguar. The beast's great paws padded quickly on the stone floor and its furred side brushed against Mark's leg as it came in answer to its mistress' summons. He could not repress a stiffening of his muscles at his proximity to the creature.

"Kuro, lead us to the lake!" Lua was saying emphatically. "The lake — the water!"

There was a low, reverberating growl from the mighty animal. Then it began to move in quick, padding run, on through the tunnel.

Lua followed, keeping her hand on the beast's neck. And Mark and Moreau stumbled on through the darkness after the two, wondering if they were not in some strange dream.

They traversed several more branching passages. Then a circle of bright, silver moonlight showed ahead. They went more carefully, and crouched just inside the tunnel, peering out at what lay before them.

They were looking out on the moonlit lake, from the mouth of a tunnel that opened in the monolithic sea-wall that protected the water-side of Krim. A little to their right, the wall gave way to stone docks. There floated many strong dugout canoes, moored to rings in the stone.

But they could hear voices of excited men on the docks, could glimpse copper-armed soldiers moving rapidly, holding up torches.

"They're searching for us!" rasped Mark. "They figured we might make for the canoes—and we can't get one of them, without being seen."

"*I* can get one without being seen," Lua replied instantly. "And I will bring it here. You wait."

She patted the big, furry bulk of the unseen jaguar crouched in the tunnel beside Mark and Moreau.

"You wait, too, Kuro," she ordered. "*Wait!*"

There was a rustle, and she was gone.

MARK crouched, unthinking now of the jaguar's nearness as he strained his eyes through the brilliant moonlight.

He could see nothing in the water along the sea-wall and docks. But presently one of the moored canoes bobbled gently on the water. And in a moment he perceived that its mooring-rope was slowly twisting, as though untying itself.

Then, gently and silently as though only drifting a little with the breeze, the long canoe floated slowly along the wall

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toward them. Empty to the eyes, it drifted nearer until it floated just under the tunnel mouth.

"Come now—quickly!" hissed Lua's urgent whisper.

Mark and the little Frenchman slid out of the tunnel, lowering themselves silently into the canoe.

"Lie down!" ordered Lua in a murmur.

They obeyed, flattening themselves in the bottom of the big canoe. They felt the craft rock strongly as Kuro, the jaguar, jumped silently into it.

Then Mark felt the canoe moving softly out onto the lake. Lua was crouched beside him and he could feel the ripple of her lithe, unseen body as she paddled gently with her hands, not using the heavy wooden paddles that lay in the craft.

From where he lay, Mark could look back astern and see the shore receding. The stone docks were alive with copper-armed soldiers, searching by the light of bobbing torches. Beyond and above them towered the black, monolithic mass of Krim, with other lights bobbing about the squat palace of the king.

They were now a half-mile out into the moon-silvered lake. Mark saw a warrior on the dock suddenly stop, gaze out toward them. Then a fierce yell split the night.

"They escape!" yelled the warrior, pointing out after the canoe.

Mark leaped up to a sitting position and grabbed a paddle.

"No use sneaking now—they're after us!" he shouted.

Moreau too snatched up a paddle. And another paddle seemed to jump into the air and dig furiously into the water of its own accord, as Lua grasped and wielded it.

"We have a start—if we can reach the island of my people, we are safe!" she cried.

The long, heavy canoe shot forward like a thing alive under their frantic strokes. They rushed over a silver sea. Four miles or more ahead there rose out of the moon-molten waters, the black mass of the isle of the Korlu.

But canoes were putting out after them, a half-dozen craft manned by yelling warriors. There could be no concealment from the fierce pursuers, in the brilliant light.

Mark wielded his heavy paddle in long, deep strokes, each of which jolted the heavy canoe ahead. The blade of the invisible girl rose and fell with swift, machine-like regularity, and little Moreau was digging the water like mad.

MINUTES sped by, and every one of them semed to bring the pursuers a little closer. The Krimians had stopped their yelling, were putting all their energy into paddling. There were five or six of them in each canoe, and they shot through the water at much greater speed than their quarry.

As this stern and bitter chase went on, the island of the Korlu slowly loomed larger ahead. But Mark felt his strength running out of him like sand, and Moreau was nearly exhausted. Even Lua's paddle seemed to drag now.

Kuro growled fiercely. And Mark glanced back and saw the Krimians overtaking them by leaps and bounds.

"One more spurt!" he panted. "We're only a mile from the island."

Lua suddenly uttered a high, shrill cry, a curious falling inflection that she twice repeated.

In answer, the Krimians behind set up a savage shout of triumph as they closed upon their prey.

Now the island was but a half-mile ahead, a dark, unlighted mass a few miles across, rising to that steep and

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somber black peak. But Mark knew that they could never reach it before they were overtaken.

"They've got us!" he cried. "Lua, you and the jaguar slip overboard and swim for it. You can escape."

"I will not leave you, Mark!" cried the invisible girl breathlessly.

"Do as I say!" he gasped. "There's no use of us all being killed—if you get away, you can help Crellys to escape and thwart Hogrim's schemes."

"Oui!" panted Moreau, his face livid from exhaustion in the moonlight. "We're done for, but if you can get Crellys out—"

"No!" the girl's voice cried defiantly. "We escaped together, Mark — we'll live or die together—"

Wolf-like shouts of bloodlusting men split the moonlight, rising above the thresh of paddles as the Krimians bore down on their prey.

Mark Bradford ceased the useless effort at escape, stopped paddling and stood up in the canoe, clubbing his heavy paddle. His face was drawn and terrible in the moonlight as he awaited the crashing impact of those oncoming canoes and their yelling occupants.

Whizz! That twanging sound came from somewhere close by. And simultaneously, a giant Krimian warrior standing up in one of the oncoming canoes clutched his throat wildly.

A red hole had suddenly been torn through his throat by some mysterious power. He toppled sidewise into the water. And as he did so, the twanging sound was repeated manifold from all around Mark. *Whizz! Whizz!*

"The Korlu!" screamed one of the stupefied Krimians. "The Korlu are on us!"

"My people—I called them for help and they came out in their canoes!" Lua's voice rang joyfully. "See, their unseen arrows smite the men of Krim!"

CHAPTER V

The Chamber of the God

TO Mark Bradford, the bewildering scene was like an incomprehensible nightmare. The twanging of bows went on mercilessly all around him—unseen bows, wielded by unseen men in invisible canoes!

The deadly missiles that no eye could see tore into the fear-mad Krimian warriors, as they frantically tried to turn their canoes around and escape.

One canoe, that which had been the rear-most of the Krimian craft, escaped. But the other craft lay motionless on the moonlit lake, filled only with dead men.

"Dieu!" gasped Moreau. "We are dreaming this—it is impossible—"

Long, slender dimples or hollows in the water appeared all around Mark Bradford's canoe, approaching him. They and the ripple of unseen paddles were all his eyes could perceive, as the invisible canoes and warriors came toward him.

"Are you safe, Lua?" cried a deep, manly voice from one of the unseen craft.

"I am here, and safe, Fuor!" Lua's voice rang in glad answer. "And these two men with me are friends, who helped me escape from Krim."

"Your father, Nurth, will be overjoyed that you still live," declared the deep voice of the invisible man Fuor. "We all thought you had perished on the mainland."

"And I would have perished, but for these white strangers," Lua told him. "They helped me escape, and they bring news of peril threatening our people."

In a few moments, Mark and the Frenchman and the girl started paddling toward the dark island. All

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around them, long, hollow dimples and ripples trailed steadily in the moonlit waters as the unseen canoes of Fuor and his men escorted them.

Soon their canoe ran in on a sandy beach, beyond which lay black woods. As they landed, Mark noticed the suddenly-appearing imprints in the sand of the invisible canoes as they too were hauled up.

And as they started through the woods, Lua keeping her fingers twined with his to lead him, and Moreau stumbling behind them, Mark heard the soft tread of many feet around him, the joyful chatter of many voices, the whining of Kuro answered by the purring growls of other tame, invisible jaguars.

"I'm glad those *sacre* beasts are all invisible," muttered Moreau. "They may be tame, but if I could see them, they would give me—what do you say? —the jitters."

Accompanied by a phantom throng, led by the invisible girl, Mark and the little Frenchman moved on through the moon-shot woods toward the black mass of the central peak.

Cultivated gardens and groves lay around the peak. And in the face of the dark, brooding mountain, Mark discerned a hollow entrance barred by a heavy copper grating.

"The city of the Korlu," Lua told him, leading him toward that entrance in the mountain.

"The city? Where?" Mark demanded, puzzedly twisting the diamond on his finger as he stared bafflledly about.

In a few moments, he was enlightened. The copper grating was raised, like a portcullis, as they approached. And they passed into a huge passage hollowed out of the mountain.

THE city of the invisible people lay inside the peak! A maze of great chambers, halls and passages had been hollowed out of the black rock mountain. And cunningly oriented shafts allowed light and air to enter all the labyrinthine levels of this city inside the peak.

Lighted torches flared along the dark passage-tunnels, and there was a buzz of many hundreds of voices around them as they went forward. Then they entered an enormous, perfectly circular space at the center of the mountain, illuminated by flaring torches and by the bright bars of moonlight that entered through the great, oblique ventilation shafts.

Here opened scores of passages that led to working and living quarters in other levels. And here in this huge torchlit hall, there was a babel of countless voices, the shuffle of numberless feet, as a great throng pressed around them. Yet to the eye, only Mark and Moreau were visible.

"Ciel!" muttered Etienne Moreau, his eyes bulging. "It is like a city of ghosts!"

"Lua has returned!" the deep voice of Fuor was shouting to the people. "These men are her friends."

A great shout of rejoicing went up from the invisible throng of Korlu gathered in the huge hall.

"Lua, my daughter—I thought you dead!" cried a cracked, aged voice.

The girl's hand fell from Mark's arm, and he heard her running forward surely to the invisible man who had called.

"My father!" he heard her weeping.

Mark and Moreau halted, staring stupefiedly in the torchlight, bewildered by the phantom crowds. But now Lua gripped Mark's arm again, and led him forward.

"My father, Nurth, chief elder of the Korlu," she said. "I have told him what you did for me."

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A thin, bony, unseen hand gripped Mark's arm, and he heard Nurth's voice, quivering with emotion.

"You are welcome, white strangers!" Nurth said. "Yes, you are the first strangers in all the history of Korlu who have been welcomed here to the isle of the Shining God. Only twelve moons ago, another white man penetrated here, but him we held prisoner until by chance he escaped from us."

"That must have been Francis Trask!" exclaimed Moreau suddenly. "The man who first discovered this place."

Mark nodded. "They must have wounded Trask as he escaped. That explains the invisible arrowhead he carried out in his back."

Nurth's voice was adding, "Lua has told me of that other white stranger, the red-faced one, who now plots with Groro to help the Krimians conquer us. His plots must not succeed—profane hands must not seize the Shining God!"

"His plots won't succeed if *I* can help it," Mark declared. "But you people—invisible—you should be able to stand the Krimians off."

"Always we have done so," muttered old Nurth, "but if this evil white man devises new weapons for the men of Krim to use against us, they may win. There are but a few thousand of us Korlu, where there are tens of thousands of them."

"Ask him about rescuing Crellys," Etienne Moreau said to Mark in a low, urgent voice.

When Mark had told the chief of the Korlu about the prisoned Englishman, Nurth's voice was doubtful.

"It may be that we can rescue him from Groro's dungeons—though it is perilous for us Korlu to venture into Krim, even invisible as we are. There are many traps there—"

"But we can talk of these things later," the old chief added. "Now my people prepare a feast in their joy over my daughter's return. You shall be honored guests at our feast."

ALL the labyrinthine mazes of Korlu were now stirring with joyful activity of unseen men and women. More torches were being put up in this great hall, and tables had been set up which were being loaded with copper dishes and flagons.

Lua took Mark's hand and led him and Moreau to seats at the head of one of the tables. She sat beside Mark, and he heard Nurth's voice from beyond the Frenchman. And from all the tables rose gay chatter of laughing voices, a babel of men and women that was almost deafening.

Yet to their eyes, Mark Bradford and Etienne Moreau seemed sitting here in the great torchlit hall absolutely alone! Only the fact that the flagons, dishes and knives along the tables were in constant movement gave evidence of the feasting throng whose voices they heard.

"Like a banquet of ghosts!" muttered the little Frenchman.

A flagon beside Mark lifted from the table, and there was a sound of liquid gurgling into a copper cup in front of him, though he saw nothing poured. Then the cup was lifted and presented to him by an unseen hand.

"Drink, Mark," Lua's soft voice bade him. "Our wine is good."

Mark stared into the cup. It was empty, to his eye. But when he raised it to his lips, a sweet, fiery wine poured into his mouth.

Moreau was staring at his empty copper plate, and the little Frenchman's face was rueful.

"This is a feast of Barmecides," he complained. "Why do they not bring food?"

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"It is before you, friend," asserted the genial voice of Lua's father.

Moreau gingerly touched the plate, and seemed astounded by what he felt.

"A roasted fowl!" he exclaimed unbelievingly. "Invisible food and wine!"

"Did I not tell you that we Korlu consecrate all our food to the Shining God, so that we shall not be partly visible after eating it?" Lua reminded him.

Mark attacked the food on his own plate. Invisible it might be, but it was solid and satisfying—roast flesh and cooked vegetables. And the unseen wine Lua poured again into his cup warmed his exhausted body and brain.

"ARE you not fearful of being surprised here in your city by the Krimians?" Moreau was asking curiously of Nurth, the unseen old man beside him.

"No, we have lookouts always on the shores of the island," Nurth's voice answered, "and whenever the Krimians have come, we have left our city here and attacked them in the forest. It has been long since they have dared attack us, but now Groro thinks our God is in his grasp—"

"Don't worry about Groro," Mark Bradford bade the ruler of the Korlu. "It won't take us long to get Crellys out of that hellish city, and then the three of us will cook up some way to smash Joseph Hogrim's schemes, whatever they are."

The strong wine had filled Mark with a feeling of utter confidence in himself. He had won out against Hogrim so far, and he'd defeat him utterly before he was through!

And in the meantime, it was good to sit here in feast at torchlit tables with the phantom throng of the Korlu! Invisible they might be, but they were good scouts—laughing, joking, happily celebrating the return of Lua.

Mark's hand, a little unsteady from wine, went out and touched the unseen girl's clear-cut face and soft hair, as he had done before in the dungeon of Krim.

"You'd be beautiful, Lua, if I could see you," he told her.

"Does beauty lie only in the eye, then, to you men of the outer world?" her gay voice mocked him.

"By Heaven, no!" he exclaimed. "You're the bravest, the finest, the truest girl I've ever met, even though I've never seen you."

Her warm fingers twined with his, her rounded, unseen shoulder pressed against him.

"I am glad you think that, Mark," her voice came softly. "I am very glad!"

The feast went on. Copper flagons and cups rattled and moved on the tables, as the unseen, potent wine was consumed. Laughing women brought more and served it, as invisible themselves as those they served.

Mark had never felt better in his life. All his worries about Crellys and Hogrim and the dread danger overhanging the world, had dissolved in his warm glow of well-being.

Moreau had put his head down on the table and was sleeping exhaustedly. The torches were guttering down, and the feasters were now moving away toward their own quarters, their voices receding in gay laughter.

As Nurth left, Mark heard Lua whisper for a moment with her father. Mark poured himself another cup of the sweet, potent wine. He drank it, and laughed at Moreau, sleeping in the silence that now reigned in the great hall.

"Mark," asked Lua's voice from beside him, laden with queer emotion,

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"you have no horror of me because I am invisible? You do not think that is dreadful?"

"I think it's swell," Mark told her. "No ordinary visible girl could have done what you did tonight, Lua."

His arm was around her unseen form, and beneath his hand he felt the quiver of her shoulder.

HIS heart suddenly began to thud. Slowly, he put his other arm around her pliant waist, drew her close. He felt her breast rising and falling rapidly against him.

"Lua," he muttered, his face taut and strange in the torchlight, his eyes suddenly serious.

"Yes, Mark," she whispered. "I know what you want to say."

His hands cupped her invisible face. He bent, and his lips pressed against a soft, quivering, half-opened mouth, the fragrance of which made his brain spin.

"Lua—Lua—," he whispered, over and over.

They clung thus in the torchlight. And Mark did not now think of what a weird picture he made, embracing what seemed only the empty air. He had lost all sense of strangeness.

The invisible girl in his arms—she wasn't now the other-worldly freak she had seemed at first. She was Lua, his brave, loyal little comrade, the girl he loved.

Lua stirred in his embrace after a time, and drew him softly to his feet. She asked an unexpected question.

"Mark, do you wish to see the Shining God?" she asked breathlessly.

Even in the flood-tide of his newly-discovered love, Mark Bradford felt a sudden thrill.

The Shining God! The mysterious thing that was responsible for the invisibility of all in this strange land—the thing whose potent lure had drawn him here, and that might mean life or death for the democracies of the world!

"Lua, can you take me to it?" he asked the girl astonishedly. "Is it allowed?"

"Yes, I asked my father Nurth but now, and he consented," Lua told him. "Come, Mark—it is not far."

The torches in the great hall had burned down to smoking stumps. Shadows filled the vast place, except where bars of moonlight entered through the long air-shafts. The little Frenchman still slept soundly.

Lua took and lit a fresh torch. And then, her arm hooked inside his, she led the way across the great hall and into one of the many passages branching from it.

The wine that fogged Mark's brain made him stumble, but his staunch, invisible little companion steadied him. They were moving down a steep, lightless tunnel that wound ever deeper into the solid rock of the mountain's base.

Lua continued to guide Mark's unsteady steps as they followed the descending curves of the gloomy tunnel. The air became damp and chill as they proceeded, and he vaguely noticed that moisture trickled from the walls.

"We are now below the level of the lake," Lua told him. "And the chamber of the God is near."

A faint, shaking radiance seeped into the tunnel from ahead, vieing with the light of the girl's torch.

Then they emerged suddenly into a vast rock chamber as large as the great hall above. It was filled with dazzling light that for the moment blinded Mark Bradford's eyes.

"The Shining God!" exclaimed Lua, deep awe and reverence in her voice. "The great gift of the earth that has for ages been the refuge and the deity of my people!"

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Mark Bradford opened half-blinded eyes. And a deep exclamation fell from his lips, as he stared stupefiedly.

"Good God!" he said huskily.

He was looking on the splendor and the terror of the Shining God.

THE thing was an ovoid, crystalline mass, ten feet high, poised on its tip in a round pit-opening in the floor, like an egg standing upright in an egg-cup. A crystalline mass that was blazing with an unearthly, dazzling radiance!

Its radiant white rays beat out like spears of intensest light, to every corner of the huge chamber, lighting it up with wild, shaking splendor. He could see that many other tunnels opened into the chamber. And the rock walls and floor and ceiling, to a great depth, were transparent, invisible.

"This thing—an unbelievable mass of radioactive matter!" gasped Mark. "From deep inside the earth—"

"Yes," Lua said reverently, "our wise men have always believed that the Shining God was forced up by great convulsions from inside the world, where there are mysteries which no man can know."

"Radioactive matter from the earth's interior," Mark repeated, staring with his dark face wild in the shaking light. "But not any radioactive matter such as is known to science today—"

For dazed as he was, Mark Bradford saw that the radiation from this stupendous mass was no mere matter of gamma or alpha rays, but comprised energies of far more potent nature.

Energies that could so increase the frequency of atomic vibration, of any matter they fell upon, that that matter became like a sieve to light, became invisible! Such was the terrific radiation that poured from this blazing God!

"See, the things that my people bring here to be made unseen," Lua was saying to him in an explanatory tone.

Mark had noticed. Around the blazing ovoid of the Shining God, the great chamber's floor was crowded with a miscellaneous variety of objects—canoes, paddles, spears and bows and arrows, clothing and vats of wine and food.

Some of these things, that had only recently been placed here, were solidly visible. Others had assumed a translucency, a cloudy vagueness of outline. Still others were so transparent that they were already almost invisible.

"It is here that we Korlu come too to be made unseen—each of us must spend a night every two moons, lying in front of the Shining God, so that we may remain invisible," Lua said.

"But I thought that once matter was made invisible, it stayed that way," Mark said dazedly.

"No, especially living matter," she told him. "Living creatures, unless they renew their invisibility here each two moons will soon become visible again. Inert matter takes longer."

"Of course!" he exclaimed, suddenly understanding. "A living body creates new cells all the time—and in time the whole body would be of new cells, and so visible."

BY habit, Mark had been turning the diamond on his finger as he stared at the blazing ovoid. And suddenly he noticed a queer thing about the ring. The diamond had become completely invisible.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "This diamond—it only took a couple of minutes for the rays to make it invisible!"

"It is always so, with gems like that one," Lua affirmed. "They and a few other things, like charcoal, are made invisible almost instantly by the Shining God."

"Diamonds and charcoal are both

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carbon," Mark muttered, comprehending now. "Carbon atoms must be peculiarly susceptible to the influence of the rays, because of their atomic structure—"*

He staggered suddenly, feeling a sick weakness invade him, a giddiness that whirled his brain.

"Let's return, Lua," he said thickly. "This awful force, or else the wine—I'm getting dizzy."

At once, Lua took his arm, and moved back with him into the passage leading upward. Mark felt as though a deep wave of darkness and weakness was sweeping over him.

"Got to stop—rest," he muttered, sinking to the floor of the passage. "Tired—sleep a little—"

"Sleep then, Mark," whispered Lua's soft voice, her hand caressing his hair. "I will watch over you."

"Too much wine — maybe—," he tried to say. Then darkness claimed his brain, and he knew nothing.

When a slow consciousness returned to Mark Bradford, he felt stiff and sore, as though many hours had passed. And his head was aching violently, his mouth dry.

"Hell, I feel as though I'd been drugged," he thought. "But that's nonsense—no reason why the Korlu should drug my wine—"

He was lying face down on a rock floor. Now, stiffly, he rolled over and sat up. And a blazing, shaking radiance smote his eyes that made him cry out.

It was the Shining God. That stupendous ovoid of blazing radioactive matter—he had been lying sleeping here only a few yards from it, on the floor of the great chamber.

"What the devil!" Mark muttered stupefiedly, rising to his feet. "Who dragged me into this place?"

Then suddenly a terrible thought crashed home into his brain, a nightmare realization.

He must have slept in front of the Shining God for many hours. And that meant that its awful radiance had for hours beat upon the atoms of his body. It meant—

Mark Bradford slowly, mechanically, looked down at himself. His heart gave a great throb, and then seemed to stop altogether.

What he had dimly feared, had happened. He could not see his own body, and the hand he raised wildly in front of his face was now as unseeable as the diamond he wore on it.

The Shining God had made him—invisible!

CHAPTER VI

Phantoms in the Night

HE, Mark Bradford — an invisible man!

"It can't be real," he muttered hoarsely to himself. "I'm still sleeping—dreaming—"

He put both hands tightly in front of his eyes. Yet still he could see the blazing ovoid of the Shining God as clearly as ever. His hands, his whole body, were as transparent as air.

Mark uttered a thick cry. He, an invisible man, an unseen phantom to the eye! The thing was so unexpected and unnerving that it had set him trembling violently. Then, as his cry reverberated through the great radiant chamber, an unseen hand touched his own invisible body, and two warm arms clasped him.

"Mark, do not fear!" came Lua's happy voice. "Now you are invisible, like me. We shall be together always."

* Diamond atoms are arranged in a peculiarly regular form, and this molecular regularity would tend to adapt itself most easily to the effect of the rays from the strange crystal of invisibility.—Ed.

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"I don't *want* to be invisible!" Mark's voice ripped rawly. "I want to be a normal human being, not a ghost, an unseen shadow—"

He felt Lua stiffen against him. And her voice was strained, and had a catch in it.

"Am I then a shadow or a ghost?" she exclaimed. "Mark, when I asked you, you said that you had no dislike of my invisibility, no dread of it. That is why I gained my father's consent to let you sleep before the Shining God and become one of us Korlu—that is why I put the drug into your wine. I thought you would be glad, that you loved me—"

She broke off in sobs. And quick contrition swept through Mark's dazed mind.

Lua, he knew, had thought to give him the greatest gift in her power, the great treasure of her people, in making him invisible like them. The girl had not dreamed that he would want to remain visible.

He drew her sobbing, unseen little figure back into his arms. His grasp tightened protectively around her, and with his fingers he tilted the little face that was tear-stained to his touch.

"It's all right, Lua," he said unsteadily. "I told the truth when I said I loved you, and what's good enough for you is good enough for me."

She clung to him, her sobs quieting, as he soothingly stroked her hair.

"We can become visible if that would please you better," Lua was saying muffledly against his breast. "We need only wait two moons, and as our bodies renew themselves, we will slowly become visible unless we return to the God."

"We'll talk about that later," Mark soothed her. "Visible or invisible, you and I are going to stick together from now on, Lua. And that's all that matters." His arm tightened about her.

Yet as they returned up through the dripping, damp rock passages from the chamber of the Shining God, Mark could not quell the sense of unreality he felt. Had any other man ever been catapulted into such a fantastic situation?

BARS of golden sunrise slanted through the air-shafts into the great hall of the Korlu, when they reached it. Lua uttered a call, and Mark heard the tread of many feet, the sound of many excited voices, as the invisible inhabitants of the city inside the mountain gathered rapidly around them.

"Now you are one of us Korlu," the voice of Nurth told Mark. "And you are the first stranger that we have ever allowed to receive the great gift of the Shining God."

"I appreciate that," Mark said uncertainly. "But my comrade—where is he?"

Then he saw little Etienne Moreau pushing through the phantom throng. The trim little Frenchman was the only person in sight in the whole great, crowded hall.

"Bradford!" he was crying, looking bafflledly around. "They tell me you too have become a phantom!"

"That's right, Moreau," laughed Mark, slapping the Frenchman's shoulder.

Moreau spun dazedly around, looking through Mark without seeing him. Then he felt Mark's face.

"*Dieu!*" he exclaimed. It is true!"

"Your comrade, too, we shall make one of us," Nurth told Mark, but when Moreau understood the proposition, he recoiled violently.

"I, Etienne Moreau, invisible? A thousand times, no! I like the ladies too well—and how, I ask you, can an

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invisible man ever hope to make conquests among the fair sex?"

Then the Frenchman's face was serious with a sudden thought.

"Bradford, your being invisible will help us greatly in one thing—we have still got to rescue our friend Crellys from Krim."

"I know it," Mark clipped. "I'm going to Krim after Crellys. And while I'm there, I'm going to kill Joseph Hogrim."

"No!" Lua cried anxiously. "You cannot venture back into Krim, even though you are now unseen! There are many traps that the brown barbarians have set there for any of us invisible ones who dare to enter there. You will lose your life."

"I'll take the chance," Mark rasped. "Peter Crellys is our comrade and ally, and we can't leave him there to be murdered in the next Games. And Hogrim has to die, before he can lead the Krimians here to attack your people."

"That is truth," Moreau muttered. "If Hogrim lives, he will undoubtedly lead the Krimians here, armed with some weapons that can conquer the Korlu. And that means the Shining God in the hands of Hogrim—of the Baltic Empire."

Mark Bradford nodded his head, quite forgetful of the fact that no one could see the gesture.

"I'm going to Krim tonight," he said grimly. "In one of those invsible canoes. I can approach the city unseen, and I can enter by that tunnel out of which we escaped."

"Then I go with you, Mark!" Lua cried.

He began to protest, but she reminded him, "You said that we do not separate any more, you and I."

"All right, Lua, you can come," Mark finally conceded. "But you're not going into any danger, understand."

"And I too go with you, of course," Moreau declared, but Mark emphatically negatived the proposal.

"You'd destroy all chance of my success, Etienne—a visible companion like you."

The little Frenchman protested violently, but finally had to surrender to the logic of Mark's contention.

THROUGH the hours of that day, as he waited for night and the start of his desperate venture, Mark Bradford felt like a dark cloud over his mind the menace that was gathering in Krim.

He knew that Joseph Hogrim was cunning enough to find some way of discounting the invisibility advantage of the Korlu. Hogrim would find a way to enable the Krim to conquer, if given time. And once they had conquered and had the Shining God, Hogrim would somehow manage to transport that radiant mass across the seas to the Baltic Empire, there to furnish a ruthless dictator with a terrible weapon.

For the sake of the world, for the life of the great democracies, Joseph Hogrim must die! Mark felt utterly justified in ending the life of the crafty spy who would, if not checked, give to his master a weapon with which to slay millions.

Lua clung close to Mark through the hours of that day. Arm in arm with her, he moved through the city in the hollow mountain, and across the island outside, witnessing the fascinating and fantastic spectacle of the Korlu preparing for the coming attack of the Krim.

Hammers rose and fell in mid-air, as invisible smiths beat out copper arrow and spearheads, which were later to be laid before the Shining God. Chips flew up from great tree-trunks on the ground, as they were shaped into dugout canoes. All through the hollow peak and across the island ran the

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sounds of activity as the unseen people grimly prepared for war.

Food was gathered and stored in the mountain-city, in preparation for possible siege. Fruits and vegetables seemed to leap suddenly from their stems and collect themselves in baskets which mysteriously levitated into the air and moved off toward the tunneled peak. Fish leaped out of the lake waters onto the shore, jerked by invisible hooks and lines of unseen fishermen, and birds tumbled dead from the trees as phantom arrows slew them.

As these ghostly people toiled and moved about in their urgent preparations, Mark Bradford perceived that their sense of hearing was developed so acutely that they could recognize each individual's footsteps and voice, even at a distance. There was no bumping into each other, no confusion of invisible hands, as he might have expected.

Etienne Moreau wandered moping through the island all day. The little Frenchman was a disconsolate figure, for to the eye, he was the only person on the whole island.

"*Dieu,* this is like being a Crusoe on an island of ghosts!" he complained to Mark that evening, as the darkness deepened and the moon rose. "I would like to see real people again—will you not take me with you to Krim?"

"You know yourself it's out of the question," Mark told him. Then he turned. "Are Fuor and his men ready, Lua?"

"Yes, Mark," the girl answered. "And I am ready too—I have my bow. I wish we could take Kuro with us, but he might give us away."

Mark could hear the soft padding of the unseen beast beside them as they went down to the beach where Fuor and four paddlers waited with a canoe.

They entered the unseen craft, and as its phantom paddles dug the water, it moved out onto the moonlit lake.

"Now may the power of the Shining God protect us," muttered Fuor's deep voice. "For we go into great peril."

THE canoe moved steadily over the moon-silvered waters. To Mark's eyes, it was merely a long, hollow dimple that swept smoothly across the gleaming lake.

He felt the invisible knife at his belt. It was the only weapon he had brought, a long, keen blade. Mark had stripped to his shorts—he didn't want creaking shoes or rustling clothing to betray him.

Fuor's paddlers stroked the waters more gently after an hour of progress, as the black mass of Krim loomed close ahead. The city seemed stirring with many torches and moving figures tonight, and ruddy light flickered from every window of the squat palace of the king Groro.

Ever more cautiously and softly, the big dimple in the moonlit water that was the only visible evidence of their existence moved toward the dark stone sea-wall of Krim. Mark could see copper-armed soldiers marching along the docks, beyond the sea-wall, and glimpsed many more canoes moored there.

"To the right," Lua whispered to Fuor as he steered the phantom craft.

Presently they were inside the deep shadow of the high wall. Taking care not to bump the wall loudly, Fuor brought the canoe abreast of the dark tunnel mouth out of which Mark had escaped with Moreau and Lua and the jaguar, on the preceding night.

"I am going now for Crellys, and then after Hogrim," Mark whispered to the girl. "You will wait here with Fuor and his men."

"No, Mark!" she protested in a tense murmur. "I go where you go—"

"I say you stay!" he told her harshly.

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And then his whisper softened, his arms tightened around her little figure for a moment. "Please, Lua—for my sake—"

"I do not want to stay," she murmured reluctantly. "But I will do it."

He kissed her, then silently rose and clambered from the canoe into the mouth of the tunnel.

The passage was of stygian obscurity as Mark started along it, his knife gripped in his hand, his naked feet making no sound on the stone floor. He had a good idea of the way they had come the preceding night.

He met no one as he pushed deeper into the labyrinth of passages. Following his memory as guide, Mark groped blindly on in the darkness, until at last a glimmer of torchlight reached him from a lighted passage ahead.

He peered into that corridor, and his heart bounded as he perceived it was one of the dungeon passages. He could hear the clank of armor and a murmur of voices from somewhere in the distance. Yet, confident in his invisibility, Mark moved out into the corridor.

Presently he stood outside the heavy door of the cell in which he and Moreau and Peter Crellys had been confined. He peered through the little grating in the door.

Crellys lay upon the stone floor in there, still shackled to the wall, his drawn white face lit by a bar of moonlight. He was sleeping.

Mark knew that he could do nothing without the keys to the door and to Crellys' shackles. And Rucho, the jailor, had those keys. He must find Rucho.

He was starting along the hall to search for the man when he heard a familiar, heavy tread, a coppery jingle. Mark flattened himself against the wall. Rucho was coming now.

THE squat, brutal-faced jailor came down the torch-lit hall, passing within a foot of Mark's invisible figure without giving him a glance. As he reached the door of Crellys' cell, the jailor peered through the grating in it in a brief inspection.

Instantly, Mark leaped forward and pressed the keen point of his dagger against the back of Rucho's neck.

"Silence, or you die!" he hissed.

"A Korlu!" stammered the squat jailor.

"Open this cell and enter," Mark rasped. "Quickly!"

With trembling hands, the jailor unlocked the door and entered the dusky cell. Mark kept the knife pressed against his neck.

Crellys stirred and woke, then sat up and stared astonishedly at the sight of the jailor entering, shaking with fear.

"It's me, Crellys!" whispered Mark. And then to the fearful jailor—"Unlock his shackles."

"Bradford?" gasped Crellys, staring around the cell, his handsome blond face wild. "Where are you?"

"Here—invisible," Mark rasped, as the jailor stooped toward the shackles with his keys.

"Good God, you've become like the Korlu?" Peter Crellys exclaimed. Then the young Englishman's eyes flashed. "Thank God you came, Bradford. You've got to warn the Korlu—Groro is leading the Krimians to attack them at dawn tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow morning!" Mark cried in a low voice, aghast at that unexpected information.

"Yes, I heard warriors talking in the corridor today," Crellys said rapidly. "Hogrim has had the Krimians manufacturing some kind of weapon with which he swears they can easily overcome the Korlu. Tomorrow before dawn they sail in all their canoes for a surprise attack on the island."

"Hogrim is going to die—tonight!"

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Mark rasped grimly. "I came here to get you, and to—"

Suddenly Rucho, the jailor, exploded into action. He had seized a moment when the attention of Mark and Crellys was engrossed in their swift exchange of information.

The squat jailor suddenly turned and with a lightning shove sent Mark's invisible body hurtling against the stone wall of the cell. Then Rucho leaped toward the door, his lips opening to shout an alarm.

CHAPTER VII

The City of Peril

THE cry that Rucho was about to utter never left his lips. For as the Krimian tore the door open and opened his mouth to shout, Mark Bradford rebounded from the wall against which he had been flung. He threw himself upon the jailor, his dagger uplifted.

The keen, invisible blade drove into Rucho's throat. To the eye, it was as though a narrow wound suddenly appeared by magic in the man's neck. Then blood spurted from it. Gasping, gurgling in agony, his eyes rolling horribly, Rucho's squat body slumped to the floor.

Mark bent over him. The jailor's body twisted, and with a rattle of escaping breath, he was dead.

"My God!" husked Peter Crellys, staring wildly at the dead man.

To Crellys, Mark knew, the struggle of Rucho had seemed a nightmare conflict with the empty air.

Already Mark was tearing the keys from the dead jailer's waist. Now he tried them rapidly in the shackles of the Englishman, until he found the one that fitted the locks.

"Come on," Mark whispered, taking the Englishman by the hand. "We've got to get you out of here, quick. Lua and other Korlu are waiting with a canoe."

He led the crippled, stumbling Crellys rapidly along the torchlit dungeon corridor, and into that maze of black passages in the rock, through which he had come. He halted there and rapidly told Crellys how to reach the opening where the canoe waited.

"But you?" Crellys murmured tensely.

"I'm going to kill Joseph Hogrim," Mark whispered grimly. "It's the only way to save the Korlu from being conquered, to keep the God out of Hogrim's hands."

"I'll go with you," the crippled Englishman declared.

"No, I'd have no chance then!" Mark said fiercely. "Go to the canoe—tell Lua and Fuor that if I am not back in an hour, they are to return to Korlu without me. At any cost, the Korlu must be warned of the nearness of attack."

Before Crellys could protest further, Mark shoved him on into the dark passages. Then Mark turned back himself into the maze of torchlit corridors underneath the palace of the king.

The American headed, soundless and invisible, toward the stairs that led up into the palace. He had a good idea of their location, from memory of the time he had been brought down them, and soon he located them.

But two Krimian warriors stood at the foot of the stairs in the flickering, dim light of a guttering torch, talking earnestly.

"I tell you, I do not like it!" Mark heard one of them saying. "Even though we attack the Korlu with all our strength in the morning, those invisible devils will ambush us and repel us as they have always done."

"You forget the new weapons which the white stranger who is Grero's ally

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has had us make," objected the other. "He says that with them, we can crush the Korlu."

"But I do not understand the purpose of these hundreds of strange objects which the white stranger has had us make," complained the other.

"Neither do I," the second Krimian admitted, "but they must be weapons of great power."

Mark crept forward. There was nearly two feet of space between the two soldiers as they stood talking at the foot of the stair. And he had to go up that stair!

DAGGER gripped tightly in his hand, he stepped soundlessly between the two Krimians. They never stopped their earnest conversation, as he slipped between them in the shadowy dusk, and started up the stair.

Exultation rose inside Mark's breast, as he reached the floor of the great palace. Invisible as he was, he felt suddenly capable of achieving anything. He *rejoiced* now in his invisibility.

The dusky corridors of the palace had guards posted along them at intervals. Laughing inwardly at the ease of it, Mark stole past them like a phantom. He began searching through the shadowy halls of the building—searching for Hogrim.

His lips tightened as he thought of the agent of the Baltic Empire. Joseph Hogrim had to die, tonight. It might be murder for him to strike the man out of thin air—but that murder was necessary to avert world-tragedy.

Mark heard distant voices, and his pulse leaped as he recognized the throaty voice of Hogrim among them. He pushed toward the voices, and presently came to the entrance of a large chamber that was more brightly lit than any he had yet encountered, with many torches flaring from its stone walls.

He saw Joseph Hogrim. The agent of the Baltic Empire, his coarse red face flushed with excitement and his piggish little eyes glittering, was earnestly talking to the giant, copper-clad king Groro, and a half dozen of his captains.

Mark slipped noiselessly into the room. He stood there in the bright illumination, only a dozen feet from the group, secure in his invisibility.

"This, highness," Hogrim was telling Groro earnestly, "is the thing that will enable you after all these centuries to conquer and destroy the invisible Korlu."

"That thing?" growled Groro incredulously. The king's brutal face lowered dissatisfiedly at the object which Hogrim held up for inspection.

The thing was merely a small sphere of copper, as far as Mark Bradford could make out.

"I see not how that thing could kill anyone," Groro was continuing wrathfully. "Yet for weeks you have kept my people busy making the things under your instructions, without telling me how they were to be used."

"I did not tell anyone, because I didn't want the secret of my weapon to reach the Korlu's ears," Hogrim declared. "But since we attack the Korlu in the morning, I shall now explain its purpose."

Mark Bradford's heart pounded and he moved forward into the brightly lit chamber. He had to kill Hogrim *now*, before he explained his weapon to Groro!

Mark raised his dagger as he crept forward. One stroke, and Lua and her people would be safe from the Krim. America, the world, would be safe from the Baltic Empire!

"Look there!" shouted Groro suddenly, pointing straight at Mark. "One of the Korlu!"

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MARK was stupefied for a moment. How *could* the Krimian king see him, when he was invisible?

Suddenly he understood what Groro was staring at. His dagger! The end of it, stained red with the blood of Rucho, was visible! That small, moving red stain had been unnoticeable in the dusky corridors he had traversed up till now, but in this brightly lit room it had at once attracted Groro's eyes.

"Kill him!" Groro was shouting in his bull voice, tugging out his sword.

Mark leaped desperately forward, trying to get past the Krimians to Hogrim. But two of the warriors had jumped into his path, their swords drawn.

He drove his knife savagely into the side of one of them, crimsoning its blade further.

"Use your new weapon upon this Korlu!" Groro was yelling to Hogrim.

But Joseph Hogrim, his coarse face gray with panic, was darting out of the room with a yell of alarm.

Before Mark could follow, Groro and his captains rushed upon him in a semicircle, slashing furiously with their swords at the red-stained blade which betrayed his location.

Mark retreated swiftly, then found himself hemmed into a corner of the chamber. Groro and his men were closing in on him.

Whizz! One of the Krimians suddenly fell, clutching convulsively at something invisible that stuck from his back.

Again a bow twanged, from the doorway of the chamber. Another Krimian fell as a whizzing, invisible arrow tore between his shoulder-blades.

Groro and his remaining warriors spun around from Mark toward the door.

"Mark—this way!" cried a silver voice from the empty doorway.

"Lua!" he yelled, and burst through the bewildered Krimians toward her.

He bumped into her slim body in the apparently empty doorway. She seized his hand and they ran swiftly through the adjoining chamber. But Groro and his captains, running after them, were shouting the alarm.

"Guards—close the doors!" the king was roaring. "The Korlu are in the palace!"

"I followed you, Mark, in spite of your order!" Lua was crying breathlessly. "And I came just in time—"

As they rushed into another dusky chamber, a group of warriors burst into it from the opposite door. They slammed the door shut, ranging themselves across it with swords out.

Mark spun around. Through the door by which he and Lua had just entered this room, Groro and his captains were emerging in hot pursuit.

"They're in this room!" the king roared. "Keep the doors locked—call more guards!"

"We're trapped," Mark muttered hoarsely, his gaze desperately sweeping the room.

There were two high windows. But they were closed, like all the windows of the palace, by ornamental metal gratings.

Groro and his warriors were guarding both doors, secure in the knowledge that they had prisoned the invisible man and girl in this chamber. And there was an uproar of shouts and running feet as more guards came hastening here.

Mark leaped to a heavy chair, picked it up and with all his strength hurled it furiously at the grating. It crashed out through the light metal. As the Krimians saw the chair fly up from the floor and hurtle through the grating, they ran forward.

"They escape by the windows—cut them down!" roared Groro.

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"Quick, Lua!" Mark yelled, and with a hand on her arm, pulled the invisible girl out through the opening.

They fell into the darkness outside, onto the surface of a stone court. Voices yelled out after them and arrows shot at random rattled like hail around them.

"Come on—to the lake!" Mark cried. "We'll have to go through the city streets."

THOSE streets were crowded tonight with Krimians, jostling each other under the light of flaring torches, excitedly preparing for the great attack in the morning.

As Mark and Lua ran into the streets, heading away from the dark palace toward the lake-front, guards poured out of the palace after them, shouting the alarm.

"Korlu are in the city!" yelled the guards.

The cry spread like wildfire along the crowded streets. Now Mark and Lua were running desperately between the throngs who could not see them.

Mark bumped into a scrawny little man who yelled in terror.

"Here they are!"

He shoved the man aside, but now soldiers further along the street were forming a solid line across the avenue, their arms hooked together and swords drawn.

"We can't get through that line!" Mark rasped. "We've got to go back."

"No—they've blocked us off!" Lua cried.

For behind them in the street, warriors had formed a similar human chain across the way, from wall to wall.

And now the warriors, skilled in this maneuver from past experience with the Korlu, were advancing, keeping their arms still hooked together, and their swords and spears level. The two lines moved toward each other, closing like jaws on Mark and Lua.

Mark looked desperately around. The buildings on either side of them were a solid wall, as was the case all through the monolithic city. And they two, invisible still but doomed, stood alone here in this block between the closing lines of warriors.

"This way, Lua!" he cried, and dragged the gasping girl toward the door of a building on their right, a low, two-storied, flat-roofed one like all along the street.

The door was being hastily shut from inside, but Mark shoved it open. He heard a squeal of terror, and then his invisible fish smashed into the terrified face of the Krimian who had been hurriedly closing the door.

He and Lua ran through the dark, musty building and up a stair that Mark glimpsed in the corner. Another stair on the second floor led to a trapdoor through the roof. They emerged on the flat roof and stood for a moment, gasping for breath, under the light of the full moon.

"The roof!" the Krimian below was shouting to the guards. "The Korlu knocked me down and are on my roof!"

"This way, Lua!" Mark exclaimed, drawing the girl along. He had glimpsed the distant gleam of moonlit water.

She and Mark hastened in a stumbling run across the roof of that building, and on over the roofs of the next structures, heading toward the lake that lay at the end of this street.

Krimian warriors with spears and torches had burst up onto the roof on which they had first emerged. The shout of their leader reached Mark's ears.

"They'll make for the lake—this way!"

He heard the Krimians clanking after them. Then Mark and Lua reached the last roof on the street, and looked di-

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rectly down on the moon-silvered lake that washed the sea-wall below.

"Dive, and swim along the shore for the canoe!" Mark cried.

Two invisible bodies arched through the air and struck the moonlit water with a loud splash.

MARK rose from the chill depths to find arrows hissing into the water around them, Krimians yelling from the rooftop above.

He saw Lua in the water beside him, as a queer hollow in the water. He swam toward her.

"Keep under water—swim down along the shore," he gasped. "They can spot us if we stay above."

They dived under the surface and swam with long strokes beneath the surface of the chill, silvery lake.

When they came up, gasping for breath, they were a good distance along the sea-wall of Krim. They could hear a blazing uproar of excitement back where they had jumped.

Then they glimpsed, close ahead, the tunnel-mouth in the sea-wall. On the shadowed water below was the long, shallow depression of the invisible canoe. In that depression, apparently sitting on the water, Peter Crellys waited, the only visible occupant of the unseen craft.

Crellys started violently as Mark's unseen hand grabbed the edge of the phantom craft. And as Mark hauled the dripping girl up into the canoe, Crellys clutched his arm.

"Bradford, it's you? My God, I thought they had you—"

"They nearly did," Mark gasped. "Fuor, get away, at once!"

Fuor muttered a brief order, and unseen paddles of the ghostly paddlers dug the water. The canoe shot out into the waters, Crellys, its only visible occupant, lying flat.

There was still an uproar of excitement at the shore of Krim, where Mark and Lua had dived into the lake. But no one appeared to sight the trail of their unseen craft as it moved rapidly out onto the lake.

As Krim and its flickering, bobbing torches dropped behind, Mark recovered his breath. He sat holding Lua's dripping, quivering figure in his arms.

"Did you get Hogrim?" Crellys asked tensely.

"I couldn't," Mark answered bitterly. "I made a mistake—forgot my bloody dagger—and Hogrim escaped. I saw the weapon he has devised for the Krim to use against the Korlu. It's a small copper sphere."

"What kind of a weapon could that be?" Peter Crellys asked puzzedly.

"I don't know," Mark said uneasily, "but it's something devilish, I'm sure of that. I wish to God I'd been able to get my knife between Hogrim's ribs."

When they reached the shore of the dark island of the Korlu, Etienne Moreau was waiting amid a throng of the invisible people. He sprang forward toward Crellys with a crow of delight.

"Bradford, you brought him back!" the little Frenchman cried. "And Hogrim?"

Mark briefly told what had happened. A silence fell over the throng of the Korlu as they heard.

The voice of Nurth broke the heavy, foreboding stillness.

"So the Krimians come at dawn?" the old chief cried. "Then we shall be waiting for them. Prepare for battle, my people!"

The Korlu answered with a fierce shout. And by the time Mark and Lua reached their city inside the hollow peak, its ramifying torchlit chambers were the scene of frenzied activity on the part of the unseen people.

"Lord, this is all unbelievable!"

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gasped Peter Crellys, his haggard face stupefied. "And you, Bradford—as invisible as the rest—"

MARK laid plans for the battle with Fuor, who was chief of the fighting men of Korlu.

"We shall let them land, when they come, and meet them in the forest," Fuor said confidently. "There we can take full advantage of our invisibility, and there we shall slay them with our arrows like rats, as we have always done."

"I hope so," Mark muttered. "They *mustn't* get the Shining God."

"They will not ever get the God, my son," Nurth's voice told him with calm certainty. "No impious hands shall ever be laid upon it, be sure of that."

Mark made no answer. He could not share the old chief's fervent religious conviction. He had a brooding feeling of impending disaster that he could not quell.

Moreau and Crellys protested vigorously when they learned that they were to remain inside the city in the peak, while Mark and Fuor led the resistance to the Krimians.

"It's not my style, to shirk my part of a fight," drawled Peter Crellys angrily.

"Nor mine either!" protested Moreau, his mustache twitching angrily. "*Parbleu,* what would my friends say if they heard that I had played such a sneaking part!"

"You've got to do it," Mark rasped. "You two are visible, and you'd give our positions away to the enemy."

But when he tried to get Lua to remain in the city also, she only laughed at him.

"No, Mark, I fight by your side," she told him, clinging fondly to him. "You shall see that we women of the Korlu can use bow and spear as well as the men."

"I won't have it," he said troubledly, but he could not change her resolution.

Lookouts had been doubled all around the island. As the night passed, the preparations were finished, the invisible bows and spears and swords were issued to all Fuor's fighting men, who were gathered now outside the mountain.

Silently, the Korlu people waited their dawn of destiny. As the full moon rode across the heavens, Mark Bradford sat aside, with Lua nestled in his arms and sleeping as confidently as a cherished child. Kuro, her jaguar, was beside her.

His heart ached to the slim warmth of her pliant, unseen body against him, the feel of her soft hair against his cheek. Would she, and he, be alive when the coming day was ended? He tried to think so—and cursed the fate that had not permitted him to put an end to Joseph Hogrim's scheming existence.

The moon set. A pale light streaked the eastern heavens. And then, from away on the western shore of the island, there came through the misty dawn a weird, ululating call.

"The warning of our lookouts!" exclaimed Fuor's throbbing voice. "The enemy come!"

Lua awoke and asked drowsily, "What is it, Mark?" Kuro was growling.

"The Krimians are coming," he said steadily. "We must fight now for the Shining God."

CHAPTER VIII

Power of the God

THE girl's lips clung fiercely to his for a moment, her arms warm around his neck.

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"Mark, if we do not win—," she whispered.

"We'll win—we've *got* to!" he declared harshly. "Your people are fighting the battle of a whole world today, Lua, against Hogrim and his country."

"To the forest!" Fuor was shouting to the throng of unseen warriors. "You have your orders—remember now that we are fighting for the God."

"For the God!" yelled hundreds of fanatic voices from the throats of unseen men.

As the warriors started to move toward the forest, Mark saw Crellys and Moreau looking bewilderedly for him. He went to their side.

"Just wanted to say so long, in case anything slips up," Peter Crellys told him, gripping his invisible hand. "I wish you'd change your mind and let us go with you."

"*Oui,* just let Petaire and me within reach of that devil Hogrim, and we'll end his plots!" Moreau cried.

"You know it's impossible," Mark rapped. "Nurth, be sure that they stay with you inside the peak."

"I will be sure," Nurth replied calmly.

And Mark and Lua started into the forest with Fuor, at the head of the Korlu warriors. The tame jaguars marched with the men. Without need of orders, the Korlu spread out in a great line through the forest, facing the western shore. They waited there in the green gloom — hundreds of invisible warriors, with unseen jaguars, awaiting their enemy.

Mark could feel the pound of Lua's heart as she pressed against him. She had her bow strung and in her hand. Mark himself carried one of the long, invisible spears, and a sword was thrust in his belt. He felt Kuro tense beside him.

"See, they come!" hissed Fuor.

Out on the beach, hundreds of canoes were sweeping in, full of the brown, copper-armed Krimians.

Yelling like fiends, brandishing bows and swords, the men of Krim disembarked in thousands, forming up in solid masses on the beach.

Mark glimpsed the giant king Groro shouting orders from in front of their formation. And he saw Joseph Hogrim's stocky, khaki figure, in one of another bunch of canoes that were now sweeping in toward a landing.

"Try to kill Hogrim with your arrows, if you can possibly do it," he rasped to Lua.

"Yes, Mark," she answered calmly.

But Hogrim, when he landed, stayed well behind the solid copper ranks of the Krim soldiery. He was cannily keeping in the background where it was safe.

Groro's bull voice shouted an order. With a savage shout, the Krimian masses began to advance into the forest in a rapid trot.

MARK saw them coming on, a wave of fierce brown faces and gleaming copper weapons, until they were only a hundred yards away.

"Kill!" shouted Fuor in a great voice.

The forest all around Mark suddenly resounded with the twang of bowstrings and whizz of arrows, a deadly flight of invisible missiles.

The arrows hailed into the advancing Krimian soldiery, and scores of them crumpled all along their line. The terrific fire of unseen arrows slowed their advance.

Like a singing of death, the Korlu bows continued to twang, smiting down the brown enemy. And though the Krimian archers loosed arrows in return, they shot blindly forward at an enemy they could not see. The advance

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wavered almost to a halt. And the unseen jaguars leaped snarling on the brown men.

"They are beaten!" Fuor cried triumphantly.

"Look — the red-faced one!" Lua's voice rang in alarm. "He gives orders—"

Joseph Hogrim was yelling to the Krimians, from his position safely behind their ranks.

"Throw the new weapons now!" Hogrim yelled.

Mark Bradford tensed as he saw the brown warriors reach into haversacks of skin slung from their shoulders, and draw out copper spheres like that he had seen in Hogrim's possession.

The Krimians flung the spheres forward with all their strength, and they struck the ground and trees all around Mark and his invisible warriors. And each sphere, as it struck, exploded into a thick, bursting cloud of greasy black smoke.

"Smoke bombs!" Mark yelled. "So that's what Hogrim had them make—but why?"

"Hold fast and fight!" Fuor ordered through the strangling black clouds. "The smoke will go!"

Already the heavy, greasy black clouds were drifting away from the choking Korlu. The Krimians were again advancing with fierce shouts.

The smoke lifted. But Mark's heart froze as he looked around at his companions, at the raging jaguars.

They had become partly *visible!* The greasy black smoke had deposited a thin coat of soot on their invisible bodies, making them appear as shadowy black phantoms to the eye!

"Now we can see the dogs!" roared Groro's bull voice exultantly. "Advance —slay them all!"

From the hosts of Krimians, arrows shot through the forest in thick flights. And the archers could see the Korlu to shoot at now, for the first time.

The Korlu, bewildered by their sudden semi-visibility, tried to rub the greasy black soot from their skins. But they only smeared it in, and made themselves more visible.

"We are lost!" Lua cried heartbrokenly. "The red-faced one's trick has taken our only advantage—"

"Fight on!" roared Fuor furiously, his massive features visible to Mark for the first time from the smear of black on them.

But the Korlu, outnumbered twenty to one by their opponents, and deprived of their supreme advantage of invisibility, were being driven further and further back through the forest, and were falling in dozens from Krimian arrows.

Mark Bradford felt cold hopelessness in his heart. This battle could only end in one way. Already the Korlu had been driven out of the forest, into the clear light of the open fields outside the black peak. Most of the tame jaguars of the Korlu had already been speared to death.

"Hold them here!" Mark yelled to his semi-visible companions.

"For the God!" shouted the desperate Korlu, and with spears and swords, flung themselves forward into hand-to-hand conflict with their enemies.

It was sword against sword and spear against spear in the open sunlight, then. A mad chaos of battle in which Mark Bradford fought like a crazy man.

He kept Lua behind him as much as he could, stabbing first with the long spear, and when it was slashed in two, jerking out his invisible sword and hacking against the yelling hosts of Krimians who faced him.

MORE of Hogrim's smoke-bombs crashed and engulfed them all in

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clouds of greasy black vapor. The passing smoke left the Korlu more solidly visible than ever.

Mark saw Fuor go down, stabbed by the spears of three Krimians. He saw Groro, the giant king, whirling a tremendous sword and shouting with bestial ferocity. And he glimpsed the raging jaguar Kuro riddled with arrows.

"We are lost, Mark!" cried Lua, a slim, sooty phantom clinging to his side. "This soot upon our skin that makes us visible—it has doomed us!"

"Soot?" cried Mark Bradford, a blinding, white-hot idea exploding in his brain. "My God, why didn't I think of it? Soot is *carbon!* There's a way for us to win yet!"

He raised his voice in a hoarse yell over the clashing roar of combat, a cry of command to the Korlu.

"To the peak!" he cried.

"It will do us no good to retreat inside the mountain!" Lua exclaimed. "They will force their way in and slaughter us in the caves—"

"But I've thought of a way to nullify Hogrim's s m o k e - b o m b s!" Mark shouted. "Come on!"

The Korlu had heard his command and they bunched together and backed fighting toward the entrance carved in the side of the black mountain.

As Mark and his warriors backed into the entrance, he yelled for the portcullis grating to be lowered. But before the grating could be dropped, the Krimians made a headlong charge and forced their way a little inside the tunnel.

Mark and his sooty horde fought like madmen to push the Krimians back out of the tunnel. And the young American now found Etienne Moreau and tall Peter Crellys at his side, wielding invisible swords in the fight with deadly effect.

"That devil Hogrim is winning!" Moreau was crying fiercely. "Those cursed smoke-bombs of his — they've taken the Korlu's only advantage away."

"If we can drop the grating to hold them out a few minutes, we can still win!" Mark yelled. "I can overcome Hogrim's weapon, if we can get that few minutes' time."

"*Dieu,* we can't drop the grating!" sobbed Moreau, fiercely slashing at shouting brown fiends as they came on. "They're too many for us!"

Groro, the huge king of Krim, was pushing toward the forefront of the battle, yelling in a booming roar.

"On, men of Krim—the Shining God is in our grasp!"

"If I could scrag that bird, it would discourage the rest a little," rasped Peter Crellys.

And abruptly, the lanky, crippled Englishman leaped straight forward through the thickest of whirling Krimian swords, toward the roaring, bull-framed king.

"*No,* Crellys!" Mark screamed, but too late to halt the Englishman's heroic, suicidal rush.

Four Krimian blades stabbed into Peter Crellys' body as he charged headlong into the brown warriors. But even those tearing swords could not halt his terrific rush.

He burst through them like a human projectile toward Groro. The huge king, with a loud yell, swung up his great blade. But before it could descend, with a superhuman, dying effort, Crellys thrust his invisible sword to the hilt into Groro's breast.

THE great king and his slayer toppled dead together. And a yell of dismay went up from the Krimians as they saw their king fall.

"*Now,* men—push them back out!" cried Mark.

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The Korlu surged forward in a terrific assault. And the momentarily dismayed Krimians gave back a little.

Clang! The heavy portcullis grating shot down in its grooves and temporarily barred the way to the raging hosts of brown warriors.

"Get trees and batter down the grating!" shouted Joseph Hogrim's throaty voice, somewhere outside.

"Aye, avenge our king and seize the God!" screamed thousands of Krimian voices.

Crash! A huge tree-trunk battered into the grating from outside, reverberating through the tunnels and caves of the labyrinthine city.

"They'll be inside in a minute!" Lua cried wildly.

"And Crellys is dead!" gasped Etienne Moreau. "Name of God, he died like a hero!"

Mark Bradford's voice rose in a fierce, commanding yell over the crashing boom of the battering-ram and the raging cries of the brown fiends outside.

"Down to the chamber of the God, men of Korlu!" he cried in a great voice to his sooty, phantom followers. "The rays of the God will make the soot on us invisible, and we will hold the advantage once more!"

"But it takes hours for the God to make anything invisible!" Lua cried. "And the Krimians will be in upon us in a few moments!"

"It'll take only a few *minutes* for the God to make the soot on us invisible!" Mark shouted, his face flaming. "Soot is *carbon*, Lua! And the rays of the God make any carbon invisible in only a few moments — remember how my diamond became invisible in a minute, down there?"

"It is a chance!" cried the thin, shrill voice of old Nurth. "To the God!"

The Korlu, a horde of dazed, sooty ghosts, started through the labyrinthine caves and tunnels, pouring wildly down through the subterranean spaces toward the chamber of their shining deity.

The portcullis grating was already bending inward under the crashing assault of the Krimian battering-ram. And the loud voice of Joseph Hogrim could be heard yelling encouragement and orders to the blood-lusting brown warriors.

When he heard that voice, Etienne Moreau's face contorted in rage and he would have remained behind, but Mark grabbed the little Frenchman and dragged him along with Lua and himself, at the head of the Korlu horde.

They poured down into the colossal cavern of the God. The whole horde of sooty, phantom warriors pressed into the vast rock chamber, at the center of which flamed the great radioactive ovoid, drenching them with its shaking, terrible radiance, burning in dazzling and unchanging splendor as though possessed of supernal life.

"Ciel!" cried Moreau hoarsely, his face wild in the glare. "The Shining God—the great secret of invisibility—and Hogrim will secure it unless—"

A tremendous, reverberating clang echoed through the caves and tunnels from above. And close on its heels came a roar of jubilant voices, advancing rapidly down toward them.

"They have broken the grating down, Mark!" cried Lua. "They come after us—we are too late!"

"No!" yelled Mark Bradford with flaring exultation. "See—the rays act!"

The soot that smeared their skins was, in the moment that they stood there, becoming swiftly invisible! The horde of shadowy Korlu warriors in the vast chamber, like Mark and Lua, were fading rapidly from view, as the rays of the blazing ovoid acted upon

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the soot whose carbon was peculiarly susceptible to their power.

Like the quick vanishing of a dream-army, the Korlu warriors and Mark and Lua and old Nurth became misty and disappeared from sight. And little Etienne Moreau was the only man left visible in the vast, glaring cavern.

THE distant roar of triumph of the Krimians was loud as the brown warriors surged eagerly down through the tunnels toward this cavern. And the throaty shout of Joseph Hogrim, urging them on, rose above their wild, exultant din.

"Get back against the walls of the cavern!" Mark shouted to his invisible followers. "Let them enter—and then smite with spear and arrow when I give the word!"

"I'll kill that devil Hogrim myself!" Etienne Moreau cried, waving his blood-stained, invisible sword, his eyes panther-fierce. "I'll do that—for Crellys."

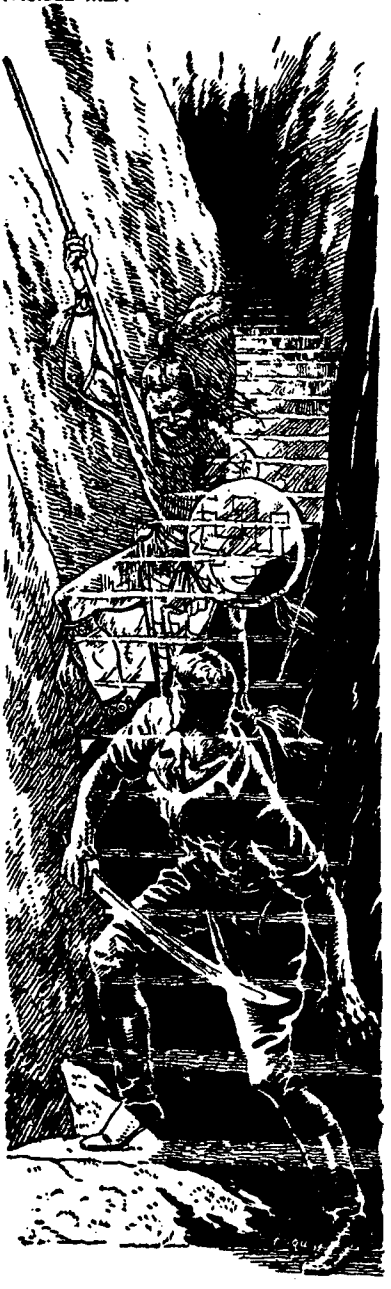
"Get back there behind that ledge, Moreau!" Mark ordered, pushing the little Frenchman bodily back behind a corner of rock where he would be temporarily hidden from sight.

The Korlu had swiftly obeyed Mark's order and had backed against the walls of the giant cave. Bows were strung, spears and javelins tensely raised. An invisible horde, waiting in ambush in the chamber of their deity!

Then, with a great roar, the Krimians burst in solid masses into the chamber. They yelled wildly as their eyes fell upon the blazing splendor of the dazzling ovoid, flaring at the center of the apparently empty cavern.

"The Shining God is ours!" they shouted in mad triumph. "The Korlu have fled!"

Mark saw the stocky khaki figure of Joseph Hogrim push through the crowd



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toward the towering, radiant mass.

"The God at last!" Hogrim cried excitedly, his red face glistening in the glare of the awful ovoid. "The great secret—in my hands!"

"Now—*strike!*" rang Mark Bradford's high, fierce yell to his invisible followers.

And from the unseen Korlu around the mighty cavern's walls, a terrific shower of arrows, spears and javelins poured into the Krimian hordes gathered around the God.

The brown warriors were scythed down in scores by the unseen missiles. And a wild cry of terror broke from them as they milled, bewildered by the unseen death.

"The Korlu are invisible again—they have tricked us!" the Krimians cried.

"Use your smoke-bombs again!" yelled Hogrim hoarsely.

Some of the Krimians obeyed his order and flung the copper spheres at random. They burst into clouds of greasy black smoke.

But that smoke wavered and vanished in mid-air, as the drenching radiance of the Shining God swiftly made each carbon particle in it invisible!

"The new weapon is useless!" howled a fear-mad Krimian captain. "Flee—we are trapped!"

And as the brown warriors surged in frantic flight toward the tunnels leading upward from the cavern, Mark Bradford and his invisible followers leaped forward with swords raised.

The mighty cavern of the glaring God became a scene of nightmare battle and massacre as the Korlu, invisible ghosts wielding deadly, phantom weapons, sprang ferociously upon their bewildered brown enemies.

The Krimians had but one frantic thought—to flee from this place, from these enemies they could not see. But invisible swords and spears of unseen men were killing them now by hundreds, as they sought wildly to escape from the cavern.

Mark Bradford, hacking and slashing his way through the fleeing, fear-crazed brown warriors, was trying to reach Joseph Hogrim. The Baltic spy, terror on his red face, had pushed through his screaming followers into one of the tunnels leading upward.

But Mark glimpsed Etienne Moreau forcing furiously after Hogrim. The little Frenchman's eyes were blazing and he was wielding his sword like a madman as he pursued his enemy.

"Moreau—stay back!" Mark yelled, but Hogrim and his pursuer vanished in the tunnel at that moment.

"KILL, men of Korlu!" Nurth's shrill voice was ringing over the roar and din of combat. "Let no one of the brown dogs escape!"

A dreadful, one-sided slaughter began, that surged up from the glaring chamber of the God through all the labyrinthine caves and tunnels of the city. A massacre of fleeing, fear-mad Krimians by the enraged and invisible Korlu.

Mark had no chance of controlling his unseen followers. They were crazed for vengeance, and they raged and slew through the maze of caverns and passages, with which each of them was familiar, like a horde of blood-mad ghosts.

Mark had found Lua and kept her close behind him as he climbed upward with his ferocious followers through the caverns. When he reached the great upper hall of the city, he found it already littered with dead Krimians.

The surviving brown warriors were fleeing in terror outside, stumbling through the forest toward their canoes. And the invisible Korlu were pursuing them, striking them down from all sides.

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Few would reach the canoes, Mark saw.

"We win!" Nurth was crying in triumph. "Victory has been given us—by the power of the God!"

"Where's Hogrim?" Mark Bradford cried tensely. "He can't have escaped, surely—"

"Here, Mark!" Lua's voice called anxiously to him.

She pulled him toward a shadowy corner of the great hall, in which lay a score of scattered dead Krimians.

Beyond those dead, Joseph Hogrim lay flat upon his back. His heavy face was horribly purple and congested, his distended, protruding eyes staring emptily upward.

And beside the dead Baltic spy, little Etienne Moreau crouched, bleeding from a dozen terrible wounds, but with a ghostly smile on his bloodless face and in his fading eyes as he looked up at them unseeingly.

"Moreau!" yelled Mark hoarsely, stooping beside the little Frenchman.

"I got—Hogrim," muttered Moreau in an almost inaudible whisper. "My sword broke—but I got my hands on his throat, and didn't let go."

Lua was weeping. And tears were in Mark's own eyes as he knelt by the dying man.

"Crellys and I—done for," Moreau whispered. "But the secret of the God will be safe with you, Bradford—will be safe with America, to preserve the world's peace."

His head sagged. But his lips moved a moment more, and Mark just heard his faint whisper.

"*C'est loin de France*," he murmured. "This is far from France—"

And with that whisper, the little Frenchman's head hung limp, his body softly relaxing.

Mark, a tight lump in his throat, held the sobbing, shuddering form of Lua close in his arms. They sat thus for minutes before the voice of Nurth came from beside them.

"It is over," said the unseen Korlu ruler throbbingly. "Only a handful of the Krimians escaped—and it will be very long, if ever before they venture to attack us again. And even if they do, they will not now have any stranger to devise new weapons for them. My people are safe again.

"And we owe victory and safety to you!" the old man told Mark fervently. "Anything you wish from us is yours—yes, even the rule of my people, if you want it."

"I want nothing but to take back to my people the secret that will keep my country safe," Mark Bradford told him. "That—and Lua."

And he asked anxiously of the unseen girl in his arms, "Will you go with me, Lua?"

Warm, invisible arms tightened around his neck in answer.

"Anywhere, Mark! Anywhere!"

CHAPTER IX

Epilogue

THE Secretary of War looked up from his desk as an orderly clicked his heels.

"Agent Bradford is here, sir."

The square, powerful face of the Secretary lighted up. And he rose to his feet and hastily stepped across the big office toward the man and the girl who were entering.

Mark Bradford was dressed in civilian clothes. His muscular figure was stiff at attention, his dark, virile face respectful, as he saluted. But his black eyes were glowing.

The girl beside him was dark-haired, white-skinned, with clear, lovely features and eager dark eyes. Even in her simple white silk suit, there was a trace of something strange in her bearing,

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something lithe and wild and free.

Mark, even at this moment, could not keep his eyes from resting proudly on her. But he hastily recaptured his attention, as the keen-eyed man before him shook his hand.

"Bradford, you know how glad I am to see you!" the Secretary was saying. "But I thought, from what you cabled in your first report, that you and your wife would be invisible!"

Mark grinned. "We were invisible, sir—but we grew out of it. You see, it took us weeks to travel through the jungle from the pleateau back to civilization, by dugout canoe down the creeks and rivers. And in those weeks, the new cells that grew in our bodies gradually made us visible. So that before we reached civilization, I was able to see Lua, for the first time."

And fondly, his arm went around the waist of the slim, eager girl.

"You cabled that you'd succeeded, Bradford," said the Secretary tensely. "That you were bringing back the great secret."

Mark reached into his pocket. And he took from it a thing the size of a baseball, a chunk of rock blazing with dazzling radiance like a miniature sun.

"This," he said quietly, "is a fragment of the Shining God. Lua's people allowed me to bring it out. By analyzing its radiation, our scientists can easily learn how to produce such radiation synthetically, and we'll be able to make our whole army, navy and airforce invisible, if we have to."

He held it out to the Secretary. "Take it, sir—it's wrapped in sheetlead. But it's made the lead invisible—it made the suitcase I carried it in invisible, too."

Gingerly, wonderingly, the Secretary took the radiant little mass into his hand. Then he touched a button.

To the uniformed man who answered, he handed the fragment of the Shining God.

"Lock this up in the vaults," he ordered. "We shall be getting a committee of scientists here to analyze and duplicate its radiation, but until then, I want it safe."

And then the cabinet-member turned back to Mark and Lua.

"I want to add, sir," Mark said steadily, "that without the aid of Peter Crellys and Etienne Moreau, I'd never have succeeded."

"I understand, Bradford," the Secretary nodded. "And I want to hear your whole story. But not here—someone else is waiting to hear it."

"Someone else?" Mark repeated surprisedly.

The Secretary smiled. "Yes—President Roosevelt."

Two hours later, when the cabinet-member and Mark and Lua stepped out of the White House into the bright Washington sunlight, Mark drew a long breath.

"He made me do all the talking!" he exclaimed. "But what he said when we left—that made everything I went through to get the secret seem more than worth while."

The Secretary nodded sober agreement. And thoughtfully, he repeated the words still ringing in their ears:

"The secret of the Shining God will remain in our military archives, unknown to the world. It will be a tremendous weapon, if ever a time arrives when America needs it. Let us pray God that that time never comes."

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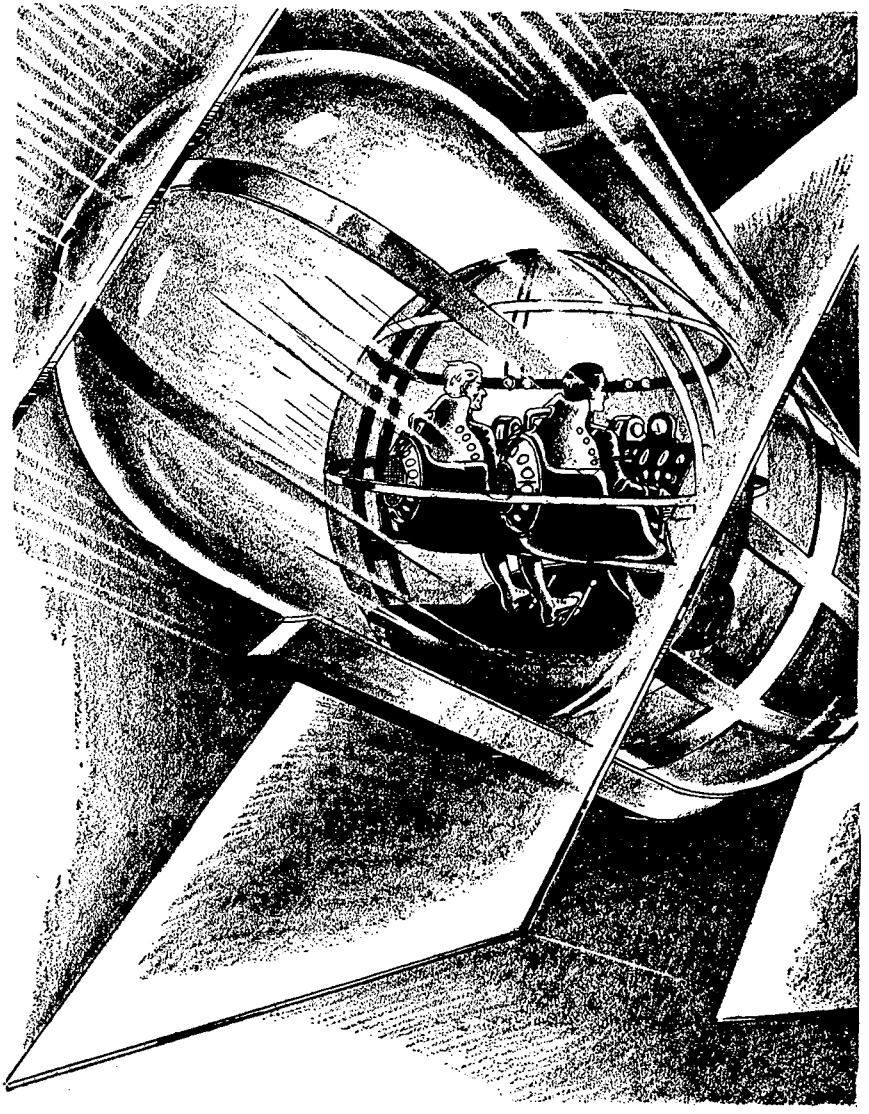
SIDETRACK IN TIME

By WILLIAM P. McGIVERN



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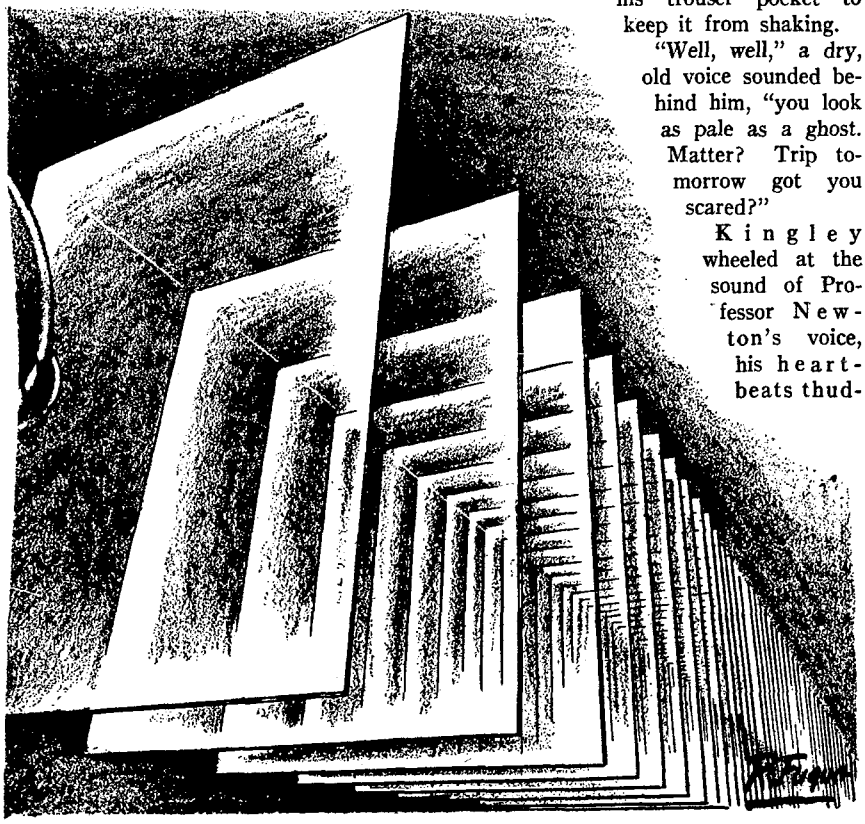
Kingley knew how to get rid of the professor without murdering him—just maroon him in the future! But he found out he wasn't so smart, because when he got back—

PHILIP KINGLEY'S hand was moist as it closed over the cold butt of the automatic that nestled in the flap pocket of his lab jacket. He swallowed nervously and licked his dry lips. Everything was ready. The old man was washing his hands in the next room and in a few seconds he would step back into the laboratory, muttering absent-mindedly to himself and peering near-sightedly about with bright blue eyes as he always did.

Then—raise the gun quickly and fire and it would be all over!

Kingley knew there was nothing to worry about but he wished the cold tight knot in his stomach would stop bothering him. He wiped his free hand across his damp forehead and then clenched it fiercely and jammed it into his trouser pocket to keep it from shaking.



"Well, well," a dry, old voice sounded behind him, "you look as pale as a ghost. Matter? Trip tomorrow got you scared?"

Kingley wheeled at the sound of Professor Newton's voice, his heartbeats thud-

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ding frantically against his ribs. The old man was muttering to himself and his bright blue eyes were peering uncertainly about the lab.

"Where in thunder'd I leave my glasses, Phil?" Kingley heard him mutter. "Can't find a blasted thing when you need—ups." He found them on his forehead and adjusted them over his eyes, harrumphing noisily all the time.

Kingley's hand tightened on the gun in his pocket. With his eye he selected a spot in the center of Professor Newton's wrinkled forehead. He drew the gun half clear of the pocket flap, waited his chance.

"Great thing our trip," the Professor was mumbling. "Ought to be proud of ourselves, eh? First humans to travel through time and pierce the veil of the future. Yessir, a great thing."

Kingley tried to pull the gun then but his muscles refused to obey the desperate command of his brain. He slumped suddenly against the lab bench his chest heaving like a bellows, his heart hammering furiously.

It was no use. He couldn't commit murder. Not cold-blooded, deliberate murder. The gun slid back into his pocket. He couldn't kill this way—but —already his mind was exploring another infinitely simpler and more subtle plan that had just occurred to him.

"S'matter?" the Professor asked grumpily. "Sick? Snap out of it, 'cause"—he paused to cackle—"we can't take any sick people into the future."

"No," Kingley said weakly, "we can't." He watched the old man puttering about the lab bench and his lips parted in a triumphant smirk.

IT was so simple. It was surprising that it hadn't occurred to him before this.

He and Professor Newton were testing the Professor's time machine tomorrow. The machine worked—they had sent it into time by itself—but this was the first passenger trip. If they traveled, say, a thousand years into the future, what was to prevent him from leaving the Professor stranded there and return himself to the present? Then with the Professor out of the way the time machine would be his exclusive property, a source of limitless wealth and power.

It wouldn't be necessary to kill the Professor then, merely strand him in time, and thus eliminate him forever from the present.

Kingley's grin widened as his eyes followed the bent old figure of the Professor as he puttered around the lab equipment. Their time trip tomorrow would be a one way trip to oblivion for the old coot.

"Can't wait," he heard the old man mutter, "to see, really see the future."

Kingley smiled.

"No rush," he thought to himself. "You're going to be there a long, long time."

"READY?" snapped Professor Newton, his old voice trembly with suppressed excitement.

"All set," Kingley answered.

It was the following day. They were seated inside the time machine on the leather tractor seats provided for that purpose. Around them, circling them like a cage, gleamed the shimmering contours of the time machine, undulating weirdly, as if the silvery bars were twisting and bending from one dimension to another.

The Professor's hand moved to a sliding bar that governed the entropy reduction apparatus on the machine, then he turned and nodded briefly to Kingley. His other hand rested on a

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bar, calibrated with time units. *Days, months, years,* were marked above small levers and another bar, fitted above this one was marked with the smaller time units of *seconds, minutes, hours.*

The Professor's hand moved a lever and suddenly Kingley felt an amazing sensation. It was if his body had suddenly developed a fluid constituency and was twisting and bending and undulating in accordance with the silver bars of the machine. For an instant he tried to yell, but then the familiar lab, visible through the bars of the machine, vanished abruptly and he seemed to be hurtling at express train speed down a black corridor that seemed, *somehow* to be twisting and bending before him.

How long this sensation lasted he couldn't tell, but after what seemed an interminable period it ceased, almost imperceptively at first and then with a swift abruptness that brought the blood to his temples in a dizzying rush.

The shimmering, undulating bars of the time cage gradually steadied slightly and Kingley was able to see a broad, vista extending before them.

The Professor was nudging him.

"All right, all right," the old voice cracked in his ear. "We're here. Get out, get out. Let's look around."

Kingley climbed out of the cramped quarters and peered about, his curiosity for the moment transcending the real purpose of his trip.

It was a barren, rock-blighted scene that met their eyes. As far as they could see mighty boulders were piled one upon the other and everything was quiet; frighteningly quiet.

"H-how far are we?" Kingley asked.

"Five thousand years into the future," the old Professor said casually. "If there's any humans, they must be occupying another part of the globe."

Kingley clenched his fists nervously as the Professor moved away from the shimmering machine to inspect a peculiarly colored piece of slate. He was bending over, his back to Kingley, inches away from a fissure in the rock that dropped into a shallow valley.

Kingley stepped behind him, noiselessly, carefully. This was his chance. He'd never get a better one. A slight shove with his hand . . .

His hand reached out, and then the Professor turned.

"Say look—" his voice trailed off as he took in Kingley's tense, crouched figure. His eyes widened and his mouth opened but it was too late to cry out. Kingley's hand collided with his frail shoulder. The old man staggered back a step and crashed downward into the shallow gully.

KINGLEY watched triumphantly as the Professor slid down the rough shale siding, clawing frantically with his hands and feet until he stopped at the base of the rock, a cloud of rock dust rising about his frail, crumpled old figure.

Then Kingley wheeled and stepped into the time machine. He grinned exultantly as he set the devices and levers, his hands working swiftly, automatically. But even in his haste he did not forget the primary law of time travel which the Professor had drummed into his head. Never return to the same second in time from which the trip originated. Wouldn't do to get caught in a time groove at this stage in the game.

He heard the Professor's thin, cracked voice shouting frantically and he heard a scuffling, scratching sound as the old man attempted vainly to scramble to the top of the ledge.

Kingley's grin split wider as he listened to these sounds.

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The twisting tunnel of blackness stretched before him then, endlessly, infinitely mysterious. Through its black unknown he rushed, backward, backward into the time that was past.

As before, the sensation departed slowly at first and then with a dizzying rush of speed. The silvery shimmer of the bars was once again visible and through their glittering undulation he glimpsed the familiar benches and equipment of Professor Newton's laboratory.

He scrambled out of the machine, the delirious feeling of success and power coursing through his veins like strong drink. His eyes traveled about the laboratory, slowly, gloatingly. All of it his. The equipment, the formulas and most important of all—the time machine.

The Professor was removed from the scene forever. Kingley thought of the old man wandering dazedly about, five thousand years in the future and he laughed shrilly. If any snooper got suspicious—why let them snoop. What could they prove without a body?

His possessive gaze rested on the time machine and he felt himself trembling with anticipatory greed. The money, the power, the position that it would give him were beyond the limits of imagination. Millions—

"Well, well," a horribly familiar voice blasted into his thoughts, "you look as if you'd seen a ghost."

Kingley wheeled, the cold crushing hand of fear closing over his heart.

Professor Newton stood in the doorway!

FOR a frozen instant Kingley stared into the Professor's bright blue eyes and then he staggered back, his jaw hanging slack, an inarticulate bleat welling hysterically from his throat. Somehow—the thought pounded with horrible force into his frenzied brain—the old man had followed him back from time. Followed him from the future to point the finger of guilt at him. Now he was moving toward him.

Kingley's tongue clove to the roof of his mouth.

"For God's sake," he tried to scream, "Keep away from me, do y' hear? You can't be here, you're not here. Keep away from me."

Instinctively his hand slipped into his pocket, jerked out the automatic. The muscles in his arm refused to lift the gun shoulder high. His breath hissed through his teeth in great choking sobs as he backed away from the Professor. He couldn't kill the old man. No one could. He had gone five thousand years into the future to get rid of him, but like some horrible nemesis the old Professor had tracked him back across the bridgeless gulf of Time.

Suddenly strength flowed into his arm and he raised the gun to his temple and pulled the trigger. The blasting report reverberated through the lab and Kingley never heard the old Professor say:

"Trip tomorrow got you scared?"

Nor would Kingley ever know that in his haste to return to the Present, he had selected *the day before he and Professor Newton started for the Future.*

He didn't even see the figure behind him. The figure to which Professor Newton now said, his voice unmoved by the tragedy that had taken place before him:

"Where in thunder'd I leave my glasses, Phil?"

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By EANDO BINDER

CHAPTER I

The Mystery of the Valley

THEY stood at the crest of the long slope that led down and gazed into the valley of mystery. Towering walls of basalt hemmed it in on three sides. Only the narrow, sloping gorge at this end, boulder strewn, afforded a rough stairway by which to descend. It was almost as if nature had tried desperately to secrete this strange, misty mountain pocket from meddling man entirely.

A heavy bluish fog covered all of its floor and clung half way up the cliff faces. No single detail of the valley could be discerned through that curtain. What cryptic secrets lay behind it?

"Just gold," was young Tom Curwood's practicable attitude. That's

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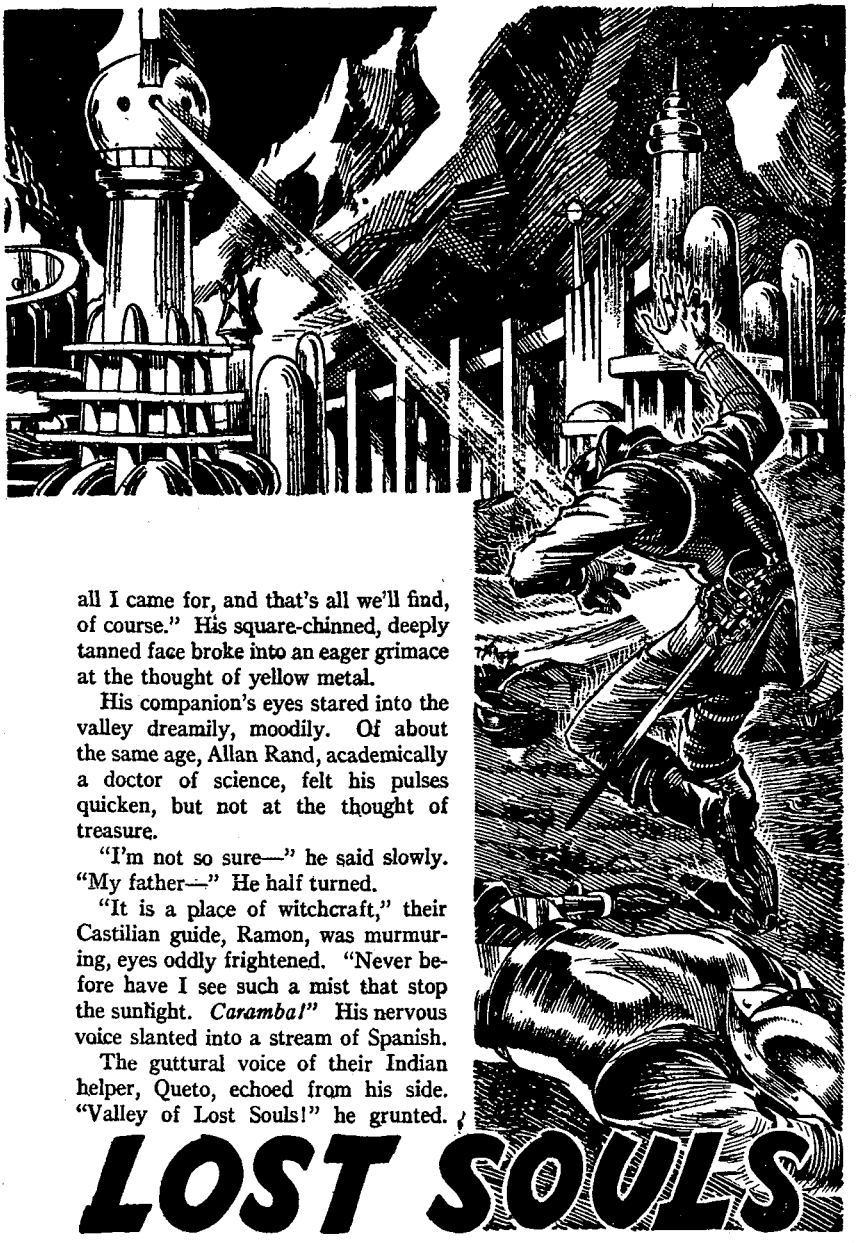

LOST SOULS

all I came for, and that's all we'll find, of course." His square-chinned, deeply tanned face broke into an eager grimace at the thought of yellow metal.

His companion's eyes stared into the valley dreamily, moodily. Of about the same age, Allan Rand, academically a doctor of science, felt his pulses quicken, but not at the thought of treasure.

"I'm not so sure—" he said slowly. "My father—" He half turned.

"It is a place of witchcraft," their Castilian guide, Ramon, was murmuring, eyes oddly frightened. "Never before have I see such a mist that stop the sunlight. *Caramba!*" His nervous voice slanted into a stream of Spanish.

The guttural voice of their Indian helper, Queto, echoed from his side. "Valley of Lost Souls!" he grunted.

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"No go in. My people no go in. Taboo!"

"Hear that?" said Allan Rand quickly.

"Legend and superstition!" scoffed Tom Curwood, his sharp confident laugh resounding from the opposing cliffs in amplified echoes. "Has there ever been treasure trove in out-of-way spots that wasn't laid on thick with old wives' tales?

"Queer thing, the mist—but probably just some volcanic vapor that has seeped from fissures through the centuries. We're prepared for it. I wouldn't doubt there's plenty of skeletons down there, but certainly no ghosts. Time's flying, Doc. Let's get going."

He sprang into action. Allan Rand helped him slip the helmet of aluminum, rubber and glass over his stubby-haired skull, then attached the double hose from the compressed oxygen tank that rested in a leather harness on Curwood's back. It was a simple outfit, designed and built by Rand, assuring the wearer of an independent air supply for over three hours.

Armed with pistol and knife, a bandolier of ammunition around his waist, Tom Curwood paused for a final handshake, then turned. His six-foot three of hardened body slowly wound its way down the slope, skirting boulders and picking the easiest course. He disappeared in the ultramarine fog.

Utter silence smote Rand. The two behind him made no slightest sound. The valley itself was as quiet as a tomb. Not even the chirp of an insect could be heard around them, as though the finger of death had withered every last inch of the valley.

Allan Rand waited tensely. Gold there might be down there, but what else lay beyond—in the depths of the blue mist?

Twenty-five years before, Allan Rand's father had come in possession of an old treasure-map, dating from the days of Balboa's explorations four centuries before. The ancient, crumbling document gave explicit directions for reaching the valley in the Cordillera Range of Honduras. The surviving member of a party of Spanish who had penetrated into the blue mist, had written the account and drawn the map. Obviously, he had reached the coast and had been picked up by the main expedition. Through what hands the treasure-map had then gone in the next four hundred years, how many others had sought the valley, drawn by its yellow lure, only the fates knew. But eventually it had turned up in an old urn the elder Rand had picked up in Mexico City.

He had promptly made an overland trip, with a safari of Hondurans and Indians, from San Lorenzo on the coast, despite the pleas of his wife against it.

He had not come back. Two years later a half-crazed Honduran returned to San Lorenzo, where the wife made inquiries, and told a horrible story of death for all except himself in the valley of blue mist. Allan did not hear the full story till he had completed his schooling and gained his academic degree, according to his father's wishes. Then his mother turned over to him the treasure-map and the last message from his father, scrawled apparently at the point of a strange, choking death.

"To my son, Allan," the already faded lines read, "when he's grown to manhood—if God grant that this message ever be delivered: I found the Valley of Blue Mist and its gold, but lingered to solve a strange secret it holds. It was my undoing. I cannot tell what I have seen—it is too unbelievable—but you, my son, must come here and with your scientific knowledge combat the Blue Mist and penetrate

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into the valley. The Blue Mist attacks the lungs — chokes out life — brings death—or perhaps not death—but I am too weak—"

That was all. At that moment death must have struck. Under what strange circumstances his father had died, or just *what* he had died from, Allan Rand did not know. He had often pondered over that queer phrase—"brings death, or *perhaps not death*"—without making any sense out of it. Insanity perhaps? Yet Allan Rand could not quite bring himself to picture that calm, clear-minded man who had been his father as insane, even in the face of a horrible, certain doom.

But Allan Rand was here to find out just what it all meant. He had induced his college chum, Curwood, to join him and together they had flown their bimotored Douglas* flying laboratory down to San Lorenzo. From here they had gone out cruising three times, searching for the valley, finding it at last and picking a nearby landing on a broad smooth plateau not fifteen miles away. Then the final trip, two days before, with the Douglas well laden with supplies, and carrying Ramon and the Indian. And now they were here at the valley itself, ready to solve its secret.

Tom Curwood returned two hours later. As his figure materialized at the edge of the fog veil, Rand gasped. He was carrying something! Gold? But it was white, not yellow. When Curwood emerged from shadow to bright sunlight, Rand saw what he carried and dropped his pipe. It was a human body!

Allan Rand leaped to flying feet and raced down the incline, shouting over his shoulder for Ramon and Queto to follow. When the three panting men reached Curwood's struggling figure, they stopped short and blinked in utter bewilderment.

"Good Lord!" stammered Rand, passing a hand before his eyes.

"A woman!" declared Ramon, dark face glowing suddenly. "A young and pretty senorita! *Caramba!* 'Tis impossible!"

Queto merely gave a grunt, then transferred the limp form to his broad shoulder and began climbing toward their camp at the top of the slope. The rest followed.

Rand helped Curwood remove his tank and helmet. "Works perfectly," was the latter's first comment. He took several deep breaths, wiped his steamy face, and took a long draught of their tepid water supply. Rand could hold himself no longer.

"All right, Tom. Spill it before I bust. That body—"

As though reminded, Curwood strode to where the Indian had stretched the unbreathing, apparently lifeless girl on a patch of grass. He started. "A girl!" he exclaimed dazedly. "Well, I'll be darned!"

"You mean you didn't know?"

"I didn't!" returned Curwood. "I could hardly see in the first place, what

* The ship used by Rand and Curwood is a Douglas DC-2 Transport. Normally, this ship has a passenger cabin 26'4" long, 6'3" high, and 5'6" wide, fitted with seat accommodations for fourteen passengers. By removing the seats, a marvelous flying laboratory was constructed.

The ship is powered by two supercharged, geared Wright Cyclone air-cooled engines, each rated at 760 h.p. at 2,100 r.p.m. at 5,800 ft. It has a fuel capacity of 510 gallons (U.S.) and 38 gallons of oil. Each motor operates a controllable pitch, three-bladed metal airscrew.

It has retractable undercarriage, full swiveling tail unit, two oleo shock-absorber units, and two hydraulic brakes.

Constructed of high-tension strength aluminum alloy, its wing span is 85 ft., its length 61 ft. 11¾ in. and its height 16 ft. 3¾ in. Its useful load is 6,152 lbs. and total weight, loaded, 18,560 lbs. Maximum speed 210 m.p.h. cruising speed (at 8000 ft.) 190 m.p.m., landing speed 62 m.p.m., and rate of climb 1,000 ft/min., service ceiling 22,450 ft.—Jane's All The World's Aircraft, 1937.

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with the damned thick blue fog and steam on my visor-plate. I just grabbed the first one and—"

"First one what!" exploded Rand. "You idiot, will you please explain what—" He waved his hands helplessly, at the valley and at the girl.

Curwood grinned. "I'd like once to see a man go crazy from curiosity, and Doc, you're pretty close to it!"

His face suddenly became dead serious. "Allan, your father was not—imagining things. He did see the unbelievable. And so did I! There are hundreds more like that girl down there, men and women, all lying around like dead. But I don't think they *are* dead! There are buildings down there, machines, implements of civilization. Don't ask me how they can be here in the middle of wild mountain land. They just are. The Blue Mist—"

A slight moaning sound interrupted. They whirled, to see that the girl was breathing, her lungs inhaling in heaving gasps. Suddenly she sat up. Wide eyes, bluer than the Blue Mist she had come from, stared around bewilderedly. Four pairs of male eyes watched her. To say the least, she was beautiful, Curwood reflected. Her olive-tanned oval face was framed by a cascade of golden hair. Her brief garments reached only to her knees.

"Hm, just as I thought," murmured Curwood, less surprised than the others at her sudden awakening. "Allan, that Blue Mist is some sort of preserving agent, keeping all those people in what we'll have to call suspended animation, since we don't know any more about it. Open air again revives them."

"Suspended animation!" muttered Rand, shaking his head doubtfully. "Scientific humbug — like unlimited atomic power. It can't be—" He stopped dazedly, finding this thing undigestible to his academic training.

"Don't be unreasonable, Doc," blithely returned Curwood, whose phlegmatic temperament accepted facts without question. "You must admit the girl's alive."

"But who *is* she? Who are her people?"

Together they looked at her, unable to classify her features, which were a strange blend of the northern and tropical. High cheekbones and slightly slanted eyes of Oriental cast, but also full lips, blonde hair and fair, though tanned, complexion of Nordic quality.

"Of what *race?*" demanded Rand of no one in particular.

The girl, in the meantime, had been staring at them in stark bewilderment. She looked down into the valley, realization dawning, then frowned daintily at the four men. Her blue eyes caught those of Curwood. She continued to gaze at him interestedly.

Curwood flushed and cleared his throat. Rand grinned in a preoccupied way. The girl's eyes suddenly flicked to Ramon and grew icy, offended, at his insolent frank stare which travelled ceaselessly from her toes to her face.

Ramon stirred. "But gold!" he queried. "Did you find gold down there, Senor Curwood?"

"Gold!" scoffed the latter. "Who cares about gold? There's people down there, man—strange buildings, mysterious machines." He turned to Rand. "Doc, if this girl revived, the others should. I'll go down there and bring them up one by one. However they got into the Blue Mist, they couldn't have any reason for staying in it forever. And—"

A slight cry from the girl interrupted him. She had listened intently while he talked and now she clearly enunciated a few words, looking from one to another for comprehension. The four men stared at her blankly. She frowned,

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but spoke again.

Rand listened to the strange liquid tones, straining to understand. Somehow, he seemed almost able to. Several of her syllables and inflections were strangely familiar, yet annoyingly escaped his comprehension. It was as though his subconscious mind understood.

"Her words almost—" began Ramon. He too had been listening intently, baffled.

Then a thought struck Rand. Rapidly, he spoke to the girl in Spanish. At her doubtful glance he switched to Latin, stumbling over the difficult words and phrases.

The girl nodded eagerly now, and when Rand tried the few words of Arabic and Greek he knew, she sprang erect with a glad cry. She spoke now, while Rand listened intently. After a moment he shook his head, still puzzled, and motioned for her to sit down.

"Speak her lingo?" asked Curwood eagerly.

"Yes and no!" retorted Rand. "Listen to this, Tom. She can partly understand my Latin, Greek, Arabic, etc., but I can't grasp her language, except for a word here and there. Why? Because she speaks the basic mother tongue of all modern speech! She can recognize the meaning behind my words because they are variations of her tongue. But I can't quite make sense out of hers because I never knew the basic language."

"Well, that helps," said Tom slowly. "Though I don't see how you'll find out anything if she can't answer."

Rand, however, still looked dazed, shaken. "But do you know what it means, Tom? The basic mother tongue, which must include Chinese, Sanskrit, etc., goes back—and back! Thousands of years. Before the schism of the Mongolid, Hamitic and Caucasian races and languages came about. It is like finding the missing link, parental stock of man and ape. Thousands and thousands of years—"

He stopped, appalled at the thought. Curwood snapped his fingers. "You can figure that all out for yourself, Doc, but I'm going down in the Blue Mist and bring up some more. Maybe—"

"No, Tom, not that way." Rand pointed to the far end of the valley, a sheer wall of precipitous shale. "Remember how thin that wall looked from the air? Beyond it is desert lowland. If we could once break down that wall, the Blue Mist would pour out of the valley like water!"

Curwood nodded. "*Now* I know why you insisted on taking that case of dynamite along—I get it."

"I came here for one main purpose—to solve the mystery of this valley, as my father wished." Rand looked again at the girl. "And there's plenty of mystery to work on."

CHAPTER II

Draining the Valley

IT was now late afternoon. Rand gave orders to set up night camp. Ramon and Queto went efficiently to work, setting up two tents, building a fire, and opening the packs of food. When sudden tropical night fell, they were eating. The girl ate with them, apparently unaffected by a sleep of unknown duration in the weird Blue Mist. At times her eyes peered down into the black shadow of the valley, with a vague expression in them, half of sadness, half of alarm.

But her eyes centered mostly on Curwood, softly, dreamily, save at such times as she shot the insolent Ramon a look of frozen scorn. Curwood, strangely stirred by her regard, found himself scowling blackly at the Span-

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Rand was too preoccupied to take note of these undercurrents, and after the meal tried conversing with her.

His voice rose often in query, and as often the girl shook her head, till both of them were nonplussed.

"Not much of a go," sighed Rand. "All I can do is ask questions and suggest the answers myself, and nine times out of ten I'm away off the track, apparently. However, her name is something like Aletha Ankhar. She has never seen our like before, she intimates, nor does she know how long she's been in the Blue Mist. By the way, Tom, she asked for your name!"

Curwood grunted and suggested they roll in. Aletha was given one tent to herself. The three white men rolled themselves in blankets in the other tent. Queto laid himself just outside the men's tent, on the grass, scorning the shelter.

The morning dawned clear and hot. After a hasty meal, Rand and Curwood left the camp and girl in charge of their two helpers and departed to reconnoiter for their plan to empty the valley of its mist. An hour later they looked down into the valley from its other end and examined the narrow rock wall that separated it from the mesa beyond.

It was unbelievably thin at the top and did not seem to thicken much at the base. A prehistoric river had dug out the valley, but what strange geological event had put this thin partition up, like a dam?

"It could be artificial," mused Rand. "Put up by these people for the express purpose of sealing off the valley."

"Scientific humbug," grinned Curwood. "Like their suspended animation."

"Something tells me I'll have to change my scientific opinions before long," pursued Rand, half bitterly. He pointed out over the mesa. "There's our route, Tom. From our plane, we come up on the desert floor. No way of getting down that thousand feet from here."

"Right," corroborated Curwood. "A dozen sticks of dynamite ought to blast a hole through somewhere."

On the way back to camp they discussed details and decided to get everything set for the dynamite blast on the following morning. As they rounded the last rock overhang between them and camp, a shrill, feminine scream rang through the quiet air. Curwood bounded into a run and took the situation in at a glance.

Queto lay sprawled on the ground, eyes closed. Ramon had the girl in his arms and was brutally trying to kiss her. She was scratching at his face and struggling.

Curwood reached the Spaniard, spun him around by the shoulder, and lashed out with a hard fist. The blow landed squarely on the dark man's chin. Ramon bent at the knees and sagged to the ground. The girl ran into Curwood's arms, momentarily hysterical. For a second Curwood held her close, hot blood pounding, amazed at his own emotion. Then he pushed her brusquely away and turned to Ramon, who had struggled to one elbow and was rubbing his jaw.

"One more pass like that, Ramon, and you go back to San Lorenzo on foot!"

"Your pardon, senors," mumbled the Castilian, blanching at the threat. "It was the—the heat." But Curwood did not like the narrowing of his eyes as Ramon turned away.

"Bad blood," he muttered to Rand. "He'll try knifing next."

Rand bit his lip thoughtfully. "We can't waste time flying him back to San Lorenzo now. We'll just have to keep an eye on him."

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A dash of water in Queto's face brought him to. The Indian glared balefully at Ramon's back. "Him hit me on head with rock," he explained shortly. "Him bad man!"

Before night fell, Rand, Curwood and Ramon had made the fifteen-mile trek to their plane and returned via the lower route to dump their dynamite and paraphernalia at the base of the tall partition between the valley and mesa. They were able to arrange the trailing wires and prepare everything for an early morning start before the sun dipped toward the western horizon. Then they made the laborious, round-about trek past the plateau cliffs and toward camp, arriving just after dark.

The girl, Aletha, looked at them with obvious curiosity as they ate.

"Why not tell her?" suggested Curwood. "It directly concerns her and her people."

"If I can get it across," said Rand ruefully. He began speaking to her in Latin, slowly and distinctly. Gradually a look of intense interest came over Aletha's face. Finally she dropped her tin platter and poured a flood of her liquid speech at Rand. Somehow, she seemed to be frightened and her tones were those of warning.

Rand spoke to her soothingly and she subsided with a worried shrug. But she made no attempt to take more food, having eaten very little.

"Something's bothering her about the draining of the Blue Mist," murmured Rand. "It isn't that her people would die, or be harmed in any way, but—" He faced Curwood squarely. "One thing I did catch when she talked. She said, 'Tom will be harmed!', and the rest of us too, I suppose."

Ramon spoke suddenly in corroboration. "Senors, she talk of great danger!"

"Oh, hang it!" Curwood exclaimed. "Maybe the girl's a little daffy, or you understood wrong. Anyway, we can't stop for a little thing like that."

A light shower greeted them as they arose at dawn, promising a stuffy day. Rand watched rain falling into the valley, vanishing in the opacity of the Blue Mist.

"Rain doesn't even roil its surface," he mused. "Must be tremendously cohesive, perhaps almost liquid. And it hasn't diffused into the upper air for at least—at the *very* least—four centuries!"

After breakfast, Curwood departed by himself, with the air-helmet, on the desert trek to the mesa side of the rock partition. The rest of the party leisurely followed the lip of the valley to the same point, but a thousand feet higher up. Aletha had insisted, by signs and unmistakable tones in her enigmatic speech, on going along.

Soon they saw Curwood's figure trudging up. He waved to them and set the lead-wire and plunger for the blast, three hundred yards from the rock wall. Then he donned his air-helmet and waved a warning.

"Back!" ordered Rand to his party. He led them a safe distance away from the valley's rim.

A minute later the ground rocked beneath their feet, followed by a dull thunder. A slow shower of shale fragments spewed from the direction of the valley and clattered about them. When all had quieted down, they raced back to the valley edge. Looking down, they saw the Blue Mist quivering strangely. Whirls and currents arose in the lake of vapor that had been quiescent for untold years.

Rand eagerly made his way to the cliff edge overlooking the mesa. Looking straight down, he saw the Blue Mist pouring out near the base of the rock

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partition. Like a river it billowed over the mesa-land. Before it stretched a hundred miles of smooth desert over which it would diffuse to nothingness.

Curwood stood there, a tiny, helmeted mannikin, watching. He waved and then the flood of Blue Mist enveloped him. Rand heard a little moan beside him. Aletha had also seen and her eyes were filled with apprehension. Rand spoke to her in Latin and was amazed at the joy that came over her face when he had made her understand that Curwood was safe.

Two hours later Curwood joined them at their camp and together they watched the incredible sea of Blue Mist empty out of its centuries-old bed. Eagerly Rand and Curwood waited to see what would be revealed.

They gasped as first a tower and then the outlines of other buildings materialized out of the thinning fog. The entire floor of the deep Valley was taken up with them. In the very center, a curved object slowly took form and finally lay revealed as a large, torpedo-shaped ship of some sort, with narrow flanges running from nose to stern.

But the watchers waited to see something more vital—the forms of the people who had inhabited this strange city. The level of the blue fog sank. In another half hour the last hazes of it had been swept away and all lay revealed.

"Look!" whispered Rand. "Hundreds of them! People who fell asleep, or whatever it is, in the Blue Mist—but how many years ago? Lord!—how many unthinkable *centuries* ago?"

CHAPTER III

The Sleepers Wake

CURWOOD broke the spell, "Nothing like finding out," he said. "Let's go down and—"

A sob interrupted him, from Aletha. Her blue eyes, gazing at the quiescent scene, filled with tears. She pointed to the valley and shook her head vehemently, speaking in her liquid tones.

Rand caught something and questioned her sharply, in Latin. The girl seemed anxious to make her meaning clear, staring as though trying to make him understand by sheer force of will.

Finally Rand switched to English. "By glory, Tom, I grasped at least half of that. Either I'm beginning to catch on to her patois, or she's modifying her words to something near Latin. At any rate, she says most of those down there are her people, but are 'bound'—I think she means enslaved! She said, in about six different ways, that we are to watch out for the Twelve—they seem to be a sort of composite Simon Legree. What did you make of it, Ramon?"

"She say the Twelve are terrible and powerful!" returned the Castilian.

"I think we'd better go well armed, Tom," said Rand. "No telling—"

A few minutes later, armed with pistols, they went down the slope, eyes fastened eagerly ahead. Already some of the sprawled forms in the strange city were stirring on the ground. A low moan arose in the air, as of hundreds of persons yawning and awakening at once. When they had reached the valley floor, several of the figures were sitting up, blinking dazedly.

Rand, in the lead, let out a startled cry. "Look, Tom!" he gasped. "That figure—the one in armor—he's not like Aletha's people. He's—by glory, he's a Spanish Conquistador of the 16th Century!"

They saw other spade-bearded men, wearing corselets of metal, with swords in hip scabbards. Also other strange figures—men in 17th Century French cloaks, 18th Century English woolens, 19th Century Daniel Boone costumes. It looked like some mockery of a mas-

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querade party. But by far the majority were golden-haired people like Aletha, dressed in abbreviated kirtles and loose blouses.

"I get it!" whispered Curwood, awed. "Every one who has come here for the gold since the Spanish first explored has succumbed to the Blue Mist—*and lived!* Doc—"

But Allan Rand was running ahead, with a queer, intense look on his face. He was searching every form he passed, every face. He disappeared around the corner of a building. Curwood suddenly understood and snapped his fingers. Then he turned curiously as he saw Aletha fall to her knees beside a golden-haired man who was sitting up. Aletha spoke to him eagerly, smoothing his brow tenderly. The blankness in the man's eyes suddenly cleared and he clutched her to him, babbling.

Curwood turned away, lips tight. He forced himself to take note of the surroundings. The buildings around were of a strange, ornate architecture. Toward the center line of the valley, where the sunlight was strongest, were the huge machines he had vaguely seen through the visor of his air-helmet during his first descent into the Blue Mist. Mirrored and skeletal, they seemed to be some sort of sun-engine. Thin vanes within glass spheres began already to rotate as the sun's rays poured into them.

And everywhere was gold. Every building's cornice was of shining yellow sheet metal; the frameworks of the sun-machines, and even the paving blocks of the city's wide main avenue.

Ramon's dark, avaricious eyes were glowing. He looked from the gold of the buildings to the golden hair of beautiful olive-skinned women, and a madness came into his eyes. It was *El Dorado!*

Queto stood dumbly, staring as though it were an incredible dream-city.

"I pray you, good sir," said a voice almost in Curwood's ear. "Canst tell me what has happened? 'Tis witchcraft! But an hour ago I fell asleep in the Blue Mist and now—God pity this poor soul, but I understand not!"

"You and me both," returned Curwood unhelpfully. He looked half pityingly at the grey-eyed man whose speech and clothing were of 18th Century England. "Brother," he muttered to himself, "I wonder what you'll think when you realize this is 1938 A.D., two centuries after your time! Why, you don't even know there was a Napoleon!"

The man staggered away uncertainly, searching for his companions. Ramon was exchanging words in Spanish with one of the Conquistadors who had arisen. The latter finally clapped a hand to his sword-hilt angrily, as though to draw it. Then he spied one of his companion Conquistadors and ran toward him, forgetting Ramon.

"He call me a dog Frenchman," laughed Ramon, "because my accent so different from his. So I tell him to go lie down beside Balboa's bones, and that make him mad!"

A confused babble now arose as all the sleepers of the Blue Mist looked around, mentally stupefied. Archaic French, Spanish, English filled the air. Bewildered, s h o c k e d faces looked around and lighted suddenly to behold others of their kind. Soon little parties formed, jabbering in their own language among themselves, glaring suspiciously at other groups. In all their eyes was reflected the golden glare of the immense wealth of tawny metal around them. They had all braved the Blue Mist for that one thing. It was the sole common thing they had among them, though their minds, times, customs,

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clothing and all else were different.

"Valley of Lost Souls!" Queto murmured beside Curwood and the latter reflected that legend for once was close to the truth.

Aletha's people, the true inhabitants of the valley, were first to recover mental orientation and go about their business. They began to stream toward the large space at the center of the valley, where the large ship reposed. They did not seem too surprised at the queer outsiders in the valley with them, but nevertheless stared at them curiously as they passed.

Aletha, however, did not join the moving throng. Holding the golden-haired man's hand, she brought him eagerly before Curwood and pointed to him, speaking to her companion excitedly. The man looked at Curwood with a half-friendly, half-suspicious expression. Curwood did not know it, but he in turn was scowling.

Then he spied Rand r e t u r n i n g, rounding the corner of a building. Curwood blinked. The man whose arm Allan Rand held looked like his older brother.

"My father!" panted Allan Rand, coming up. "I knew I'd find him alive, too. Look, Tom, he was thirty years old when he came to the valley, twenty-five years ago. He is still thirty, physically, just two years older than I, his son!"

"The Blue Mist—"

"Of course," Rand nodded. "It preserved human bodies, buildings, metal, everything in this valley, from the hand of time. Impossible, but true!"

The elder Rand gravely shook hands with Curwood. His eyes had a punch-drunk expression. "It is a miracle to be alive!" he whispered hoarsely. "But I knew I would be, seeing the others preserved in the Blue Mist. Just before I succumbed to the mist, I wrote that note to Allan. It hardly seems possible that it was twenty-five years ago! I gave it, and the map, to the Honduran of my party who had come into the mist, searching for me. He had not been in long enough to yield to it. Thank God for that!"

"The same map," murmured Allan Rand, "that brought these dozens of adventurers of four different centuries to this valley! Has fate ever played a stranger game? And Aletha and her people? That *is* the mystery to be solved!"

They turned to the rest of their party. Aletha and the golden-haired man were still talking excitedly. Queto stood stolidly by. Ramon, however, was missing. When questioned, Queto could only say that the Castilian had slipped away in the crowd.

Aletha tugged at Allan Rand's sleeve and spoke, voice shrill, accents worried. Rand swung to the others. "Aletha says we must leave," he announced. "She says chances of escaping the Twelve, whoever they are, are getting slimmer every second. Up the slope, all of us. I'll try to get more out of her up there. She risked coming down here in the first place only to find her brother here, Enzal."

Rand did not notice that Curwood's face suddenly cleared as if by magic at the word "brother." But Aletha did; she drew close to him as the party set off for the slope at a half-run. Curwood felt like kicking himself for not noticing the strong family resemblance in their faces.

"I don't quite see the sense of this," panted the elder Rand to his son as Aletha sprang fleet-footed to the fore and urged them on with frantic gestures.

"Nor do I, exactly," confessed the younger man. "But I can tell you that girl is dead serious about the danger."

Aletha and her brother both showed

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by their fear-struck faces that they expected some form of resistance from the mysterious Twelve back in the city. They scrambled up the slope pantingly. Some deep-rooted dread of what lay behind lashed them on. The others wondered.

Suddenly, when they had achieved more than half the slope, they all stopped, as though by command. To Allan Rand, it felt like the effect of a narcotic drug. Though his conscious mind could think as clearly as before, something had gripped his subconscious with intangible fingers. Against his wishes, he found his body turning back to the valley. Alarmed, he tried to fight off the insidious hypnotic spell, but he could not move another inch up the slope.

The party of six made its way down the slope, under command of an alien will!

"Damn!" gasped Curwood. "What is this? Doc, any idea? Can we break out of it somehow?"

"I'm afraid not," Allan Rand's eyes were bleak. "Some devilish force has gained control of our locomotor brain-centers. Suspended animation—mental control! God, what sort of wizards are these Twelve!"

The two golden-haired people had fallen silent. They stumbled down the slope in dejection, shoulders drooping. Their manner spoke so eloquently of defeat and despair that a gloomy pall of silence fell over them all. Like robots they strode toward the center of the city.

Here, circled by buildings was a large space filled with the entire population of the valley. They were clustered around a central platform, back of which was the huge, finned ship, and beside it a tall, needle-like tower of gleaming metal from whose apex every inch of the valley floor must be visible. Several figures were in the tower, manipulating strange mirror-like devices.

The ranks of the golden-haired people parted, leaving an aisle to the platform. Under the weird mental control, the party of six made its way to the dais, stood before it. They found themselves beside the lost souls of the past centuries. They, too, had been herded here by the mental control. Their superstitious faces glowed with stark fear at this manifestation of witchcraft. And it was plain that all the hundreds of golden-haired people back of them, too, were in fear and awe of the figures on the platform, who had brought this all about.

CHAPTER IV

Slavery

THEY were the Twelve. A dozen men of the golden-haired race, lines of haughtiness, even cruelty, in their faces, sat in ornate chairs on the dais, looking disdainfully out at the crowd. One of their number was haranguing the golden-haired people in their own tongue. Suddenly he waved a hand in dismissal and the crowd dispersed, quickly and obediently, vanishing among the buildings.

Curwood suddenly grunted and nudged Rand, pointing to the far end of the platform. A thirteenth figure was there, leering at them.

"Ramon!" gasped Rand.

One of the Twelve now stood before the motley group remaining. He fastened his icy blue eyes particularly on Aletha and her brother and queried them sharply. Aletha answered, first with humble fear, then with stubborn defiance. The eyes of the man on the platform blazed angrily and he spoke imperiously.

Aletha turned a grave face to Allan Rand and words tumbled out tremu-

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lously. Rand's face grew worried. He translated to the others. "The Twelve are angry at her and us for trying to escape. No one must escape the valley. We are to be slaves to the Twelve, just as Aletha's people are and have been! Evidently Aletha told them they had no right to enslave us, but the Twelve say they are masters of all who come before them. Maybe I'm making this up, I don't know. But she intimates that they consider themselves the future rulers of all the world, by right of conquest!"

"The Napoleon complex, eh?" ground out Curwood. "We'll see about that." He gripped his friend's arm fiercely. "Look—fifty armed men here who owe no allegience to the Twelve. Four of us have pistols. And that damned mental control isn't on us right now. Doc, you rally these men in French and Spanish; I'll use English. We'll settle this master business here and now—"

Realizing the advantage of swift attack, Rand agreed, whispering hastily to his father and Queto. Curwood gently pulled Aletha back of them. At a prearranged signal, Rand and Curwood drew their pistols and fired pointblank at the figures on the platform, shouting loudly in the meantime to the fierce armed men around them, in three languages. Men of action, they caught fire instantly. Swords, knives and ancient flintlocks flashed in the sunlight. With a concerted rush, the fifty men swarmed toward the platform, faces alight with battle lust.

Strangely, the Twelve on the dais were not alarmed. They did not even arise from their chairs. Nor did any of them fall from the bullets aimed at them. And when the vanguard of the warriors tried to clamber up the edge of the platform like pirates boarding a vessel, an invisible wall of force bruised their knuckles and bumped their heads. In utter surprise they fell back. Then fear drove the battle light out of their faces. This again was witchcraft!

"No use!" groaned Allan Rand, as Curwood reloaded his emptied pistol. "Our bullets don't even get there. They are protected by an invisible barrier. They *are* wizards—scientific wizards! In a way, we played into their hands, for they have proven themselves invulnerable!"

Curwood swore, shot three more times at the Twelve with deliberate aim. Plainly he could see sudden disks of lead form in mid-air at the edge of the platform, and drop to the ground. Aletha came before him and stared up into his face, blue eyes brimming with tears, smiling sadly. She seemed to voicelessly praise his bravery and deplore their helplessness.

Then, as though to demonstrate further the Twelve's power, the intangible mind-gripping mental ray bathed them again. Under command of the alien will, weapons were tossed in a heap. Curwood strained to resist but found himself tossing his pistol atop the pile of swords, as though he were another person.

Rand looked up. That ray came from the top of the tall tower. And perhaps the curtain of protective forces also. Energy came from the giant machine beside the tower, its strange mirrors gathering in sun-power silently. Were they inoperative at night, or did they store power?

Now unarmed and sheepishly humble, the half hundred of four centuries stared at the Twelve, wondering what their fate was to be. Finally a tall, dark figure stepped in the speaker's position. It was Ramon, smirking in the direction of Rand's group.

"He's evidently wormed into their confidence," hissed Allan Rand. "He

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knows Latin, of course, and so made himself understood."

Ramon gave a short, concise message in Spanish, French and finally English, addressing the entire group.

"You are slaves of the Twelve," he said. "The Twelve are all-powerful, as you have seen. They are mighty wizards of a land far away in time. Do as you are told and no harm will come to you. Do not try to escape the valley. The next one that tries will be killed by a burning death. The Twelve have spoken! You will now be led to the far end of the city, to labor. Remember, death comes swiftly if you disobey. Go!"

Cruel-faced men with long, black whips had now appeared behind the massed group. Snapping them, they motioned down the long main avenue. Cowed, crestfallen by the overwhelming events of the past hour since the awakening, the men obeyed. They were no longer proud Conquistadors, haughty French noblemen, empire-building Englishmen—they were slaves! The whips cracked and the lines moved faster.

Ramon stayed Rand's group and spoke to them. "Slaves!" he jeered. "Look upon your master! But yesterday you, Senor Curwood, struck me. You shall suffer for it. The girl, Aletha, thinks I am not worthy of her. I will have other slave-women, and her, too. But now to your labors, slaves!"

Curwood turned in contempt, cursing under his breath, and he and his companions followed the last of the other-century men out of the large central space. They were led down the long main avenue toward the far end of the valley, flanked by men with whips.

"Aletha was right all the time about things down here," muttered Curwood. "If we had only known the full truth at the first!"

"Mysterious business," said Allan Rand, preoccupied. "Just who are these golden-haired people? From what civilization and time? Why the Blue Mist?" One amazing theory ran through his mind like wildfire.

Soon they came upon a hundred or more of the golden-haired people, also slaves, quarrying within a large limestone fissure at the base of the valley's sheer northern wall. Crude saws, drills and levers were their tools, in sharp contrast to the magnificent machines in the city. Driven by the whips, the slaves were made to load the huge stone blocks on rough litters and drag them over the hard, caked ground by ropes, toward the city's fringe. Here, a new building was being erected in much the same manner as in the Middle Ages.

It was hard hot work in the broiling sun. Curwood's face became savagely bitter when he saw that Aletha was the only woman in the quarry. It was her punishment for engineering the near-escape. Night fell before much had been done, but they trudged cityward with already aching muscles and sweaty bodies.

They were herded into a large building, fed a weak, tasteless gruel, and then allowed to lie down on the floor to sleep, without blankets or comforts of any kind. It was barbaric slavery of the cruelest sort, evidently administered to humble their spirits. Stupified, mentally fogged, the other-century men muttered among themselves for a while and went wearily to sleep.

Rand and Curwood discussed the situation in low tones. The elder Rand seemed weighed down by bewilderment and spoke little. Queto sat stolidly, philosophically inert. But his eyes gleamed a little when they spoke of escape, at night when the moon had set and all was dark. Aletha, dispirited,

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sat close to her equally depressed brother, both silent. For them, the interlude of the Blue Mist sleep had been but a second's interruption of their slavehood.

Curwood had purposely chosen, for their group, a position near the open doorway. In the middle of the night, s l e e p l e s s, they crept out silently. Strangely, no guards were about. The way was open. It seemed suspicious, as though the Twelve feared no escape at night for some very good reason.

They stumbled along, led by Curwood toward the slope. When they rounded the last building, they saw the reason for a strange glow ahead. A broad beam of light bathed the entire width of the slope and up for a distance of a hundred feet. Beyond was utter darkness and perhaps safety. But no one could cross that illuminated stretch without detection!

Curwood was about to suggest a desperate try when they saw several other crouching figures in the shadows ahead. Some of the more spirited of the other-century men were here, seeking freedom also. These darted forward suddenly, six of the spade-bearded Conquistadors shed of their armor, widely separated in cunning strategy.

Into the lighted area they dashed, up the slope with flying feet. Soundlessly, something stabbed from the tower back of them. The first man stopped, shriveled into something black, fell. With pauses of a second or two between, the others were picked off, charred by some horrible beam of incandescence. The last man, seeing, gave up and attempted to run back, screaming in surrender. He too fell a blackened corpse.

Aletha said something in the dead, horrified silence. "She says it is the same now as it was before—no escape," whispered Rand. He shuddered in nausea, as an odor of burnt human flesh wafted down to them.

"Wait!" h i s s e d Curwood. "The other side—the hole we blasted in the rock-wall! Maybe they haven't—" He led the way at a run. But long before they had arrived, they saw that another beam from the tower lime-lighted that single other egress from the valley of slavery.

They returned dejectedly to their sleeping place, aware as never before of the Twelve's diabolical thoroughness. They slept a few weary hours before dawn brought the men with whips.

The next day was a nightmare. The overseers with the whips lashed often with them. Many a man staggered around with stinging, bruised flesh. One slender Frenchman, a mere lad, collapsed in the heat. He was flogged mercilessly and left to die in the hot sun. A friend who knelt beside him was driven away with the whips.

Water and food were distributed sparsely at noon. Rand wondered how any of the golden-haired slaves could still be alive under such treatment in the past. He surmised that there were other grades of slaves, better treated. These in the quarry were the most belligerent, most defiant. The new men were here to have their spirits thoroughly broken before being given a place in the city.

Curwood contrived to keep always near Aletha, taking half her burden whenever he could. He stepped before the lash that came her way once, and for his pains received three more. His eyes became cold, glittering orbs of slow, dangerous wrath. Yet he kept his control in the face of helplessness.

With tight jaws he worked on, until a disturbance came.

All heads, even those of the whip-holders, jerked up and stared as the huge airship at the center of the city lifted into the air silently and soared

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grandly, magically, over them.*

Then it darted away to the north, with incredible velocity.

"Gravity motors!" marvelled Allan Rand. "The science of these Twelve is that of supergenius. If only the modern world could have some of it!"

"I wish we had dropped a stick of dynamite into the Blue Mist first, and then drained it away," growled Curwood.

The back-breaking labor went on, human souls being crushed beneath the heel of tyranny. In the late afternoon, just after the airship returned from its mysterious cruise, a guard approached Aletha, spoke, and pointed to her companions.

"An audience with Ramon," translated Rand.

CHAPTER V

Running Death's Gauntlet

THEY were led to the city and into a building whose interior was blessedly cool. In a room dazzling with gold floor, gold statuettes and golden table sat Ramon, now dressed in a flowing robe spangled with golden threads. A golden light of madness shone from his eyes as he stared insolently at the tired, sweaty faces of his erstwhile companions. They had to stand before him, since he occupied the only chair.

"Slaves!" he greeted mockingly.

"Better than being a rat!" snarled Curwood.

Ramon ignored this. "I will tell you what I have learned of these golden-haired people," he continued, "so that you may know to what heights Ramon Hernando will rise. They represent a civilization and science greater than the present. After much effort with Latin, I have pieced together something of their history."

Allan Rand leaned forward in deep interest.

"Their time flowered some fifteen thousand years ago!" pursued Ramon. "They lived on a huge island or continent known to us in legend as—Atlantis!"

"Atlantis!" breathed Rand, nodding as though he had known all the time. "But why did they come here—the Blue Mist—"

"Listen!" admonished the Castilian. "Atlantis was great and powerful for five thousand years, but in her decadence refused the leadership of—the Twelve. These Twelve were her best scientists. They were exiled for their political activities. They came to this valley, built the city, cleverly abducted these Atlantides as slaves. It took years of great planning and effort; I do not know the full story. *Then they destroyed Atlantis,* in fitting revenge!"

His audience stared in shocked silence. Aletha, apparently sensing of what he told, turned to her brother with a sad face. In their eyes was reflected a fresh horror at that great and terrible holocaust of a long-gone age. Millions upon millions of their people, all the world they had known, had been wiped out of existence, in a totality of stark destruction that stunned the mind to think of it.

Even Ramon's face was solemn as he went on. "I know not how it was done, but Atlantis, and all within it, were caused to sink beneath the waves. A holocaust of land and sea in turmoil

* All through the legends of ancient Atlantis and Lemuria are references to these mysterious ships that apparently used no motors with moving parts, or any known means of propulsion. They were not rocket ships, because the most significant feature of their operation was their complete silence. However, according to the majority of legends, they were powerless to ascend to very great heights, and their ceiling seemed to be in the neighborhood of 600 feet. Thus, the ship of the Ancients in the valley must have been an improvement over the original Atlantean ships.—Ed.

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spread all over the earth of that time. But the Twelve were prepared. They had picked this valley, knowing it was safe, for it rested on faultless bedrock. Then, to escape death by the deadly inner-earth fumes that spewed forth from great rents in the writhing crust and saturated the air, they filled the valley with the Blue Mist, deathless, protective, unchangeable by time. Only in one thing did they miscalculate. A machine set to disperse the Blue Mist at a future time failed to work, for it, too, had succumbed to the timelessness of the Mist.

"They had set it to awaken them about a century after their time, when earth would have again quieted down, and start a new civilization under their rule. Instead, they have awakened in this late age, when the descendants of some hardy, barbaric survivors have repopulated earth and builded another civilization. They find the earth which is theirs ruled by others. But they are undaunted, the Twelve. *They will conquer this modern world!*"

"So, just like that?" challenged Curwood.

"Why not?" returned the Castilian easily. "The superminds that clashed the elemental forces of land, sea and inner-earth together to wreck a world can easily destroy cities and armies. Today I rode in their marvellous gravity-ship. In four hours we whisked to New York City and back, some ten thousand miles I believe, via the stratosphere. I have told them to attack that city first, in their campaign for world conquest!"

"You devils!" grated Curwood, clenching his fists.

"I am to be an important part of their plans," went on Ramon boastfully. "They need someone like myself to tell them of a modern world they must conquer. I have already been granted authority. You, my friends, will continue to slave in the quarries, save for the girl, if she wishes. Aletha—" He switched to Latin.

Curwood could not understand the words, but by the disgust in Rand's face and the flush in Aletha's, he knew what the Castilian was offering.

"Damn you—" Curwood sprang forward, intent on smashing the insulting, leering face before him.

Ramon, prepared, quickly pressed a button on the table. Curwood's body jerked to a halt, relaxed. Though the veins stood out on his forehead in effort, he could not move another inch toward his enemy. The mental control, emanating from some hidden mechanism in the room, had robbed him of volition.

"Go, fool!" commanded Ramon triumphantly. "You will labor unfed in the quarries. I will let Aletha watch you die by inches. That should soften her haughty manner!"

Out in the hot sunshine, Rand looked wonderingly around at the city. "Atlantis!" he murmured. "This is of Atlantis, of fifteen thousand years ago! The most fantastic fable of antiquity come true! A greater civilization than that we know wiped out by twelve superscientists—twelve malevolent minds which touch the heights of genius and the depths of depravity. Twelve—"

"Thirteen, you mean!" grunted Curwood. "Thirteen sadistic devils in a valley of hell! Ramon, curse him, I'll—"

Rand grasped Curwood's arm tightly. His lips twitched. "Tom, let's not think of ourselves. Let's think of the world! It may sound melodramatic, but we're about all that stands between the Twelve and world conquest! No Alexander, or Napoleon, or Fascist dictator ever had behind him such inconceivable power as these Twelve. I am a scien-

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tist. So help me God, I have seen things *impossible* in *my* science! Their science and our science—like the machine-gun against the spear. Do you see?"

"Is it as bad—as that?" queried Curwood thoughtfully. No answer was needed.

Dog-weary from their labors, they sat down that night in the sleeping-place. The golden-haired guards that came around with food passed them by. None of the other-century men offered to share with them. The portions were pitifully small to start with.

"Ramon has ordered our death, by starvation and hard labor," Rand sighed bitterly. "He knows alive we'd sooner or later throw a wrench around here. Perhaps tomorrow he will have us murdered in cold blood. Aletha, poor girl—"

"Tonight!" hissed Curwood, suddenly. "We must try it tonight!"

He beckoned the others of his group near him and whispered rapidly. "If *both* exits of the valley are rushed at once, perhaps somebody can win through, escape, warn the world! We can't look for help from the other-century men—drugged with superstition. Nor Aletha's people—slaves too long, broken spirited. Besides, a large crowd would be no good; alarm would spread prematurely. We must do it ourselves—our group! It's a gamble with death. But of course I can't force any of you—"

The elder Rand spoke up quickly. "Count me in. I'm living on stolen time—should have been dead twenty-five years ago. Let death have me now, if it must."

Queto grunted. "Bad medicine stay here. Me try."

Rand translated to Aletha and Enzal in Latin. He rendered their answers in English. "Enzal says he is willing to risk life for his people. Aletha—well, Tom, I guess you know—" He smiled wanly at the flash in their eyes as they looked at each other, pledging devotion, sacrifice. He went on, "Six of us, three at the slope, three at the wall-aperture and may God save one of us!"

"No!" said Curwood sharply. "Five of us at the slope—to draw the full attention of the tower men. Only *one* at the wall-aperture. That'll be you, Doc—"

"*You!*" returned Allan Rand. "You can run faster—more chance. Damn you"—he went on fiercely as Curwood tried to argue—"don't think of me. This is for all of us, for all we know, love, cherish in the outer world—"

It was arranged that way. Hours later, they crept cautiously past the snoring, sprawled forms of the past-century men, stepped out in the unlighted, dead-quiet city. Only the undiffused beams from the tower could be seen stabbing to both ends of the valley.

Curwood shook hands silently with Rand, gripping his shoulder eloquently. Aletha he kissed tenderly on the forehead, staring a moment into her tear-shining eyes. Then he waved to the others and turned.

"Wait for my signal, Tom," admonished Rand. They separated. Curwood's tall figure vanished in the darkness.

Rand led his silent group toward the slope. Arriving, they stooped and crept to the edge of the broad, lighted area, widely separated. Each had been told what to do, both now and later if one escaped.

Lips moving unconsciously in a prayer, Rand gripped the rock in his hand firmly, then stood and cast it with all his strength for the nearer cliff. A second later a sharp crack resounded through the silent valley.

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The signal!

Rand raced forward with a shout. His four companions jumped erect and plunged up the slope, into the illuminated area of burning death. Rand winced and waited for the death-beam to shrivel him to a corpse. But it flicked to Enzal first, and the golden-haired man was the first martyr in their race against death. Rand saw Aletha stumble momentarily, scream once in sharp sorrow, and then bravely fly on.

Rand gasped as he saw Queto, to the left, leap off the ground, turn black, fall—a t w i t c h i n g, charred corpse. Number two! Who would be next?

A sob racked his throat then as his father staggered—Rand turned his eyes away, horrified. Number three!

Lost in a nightmare daze, racing endlessly it seemed through a ghastly white land, Allan Rand was vaguely aware of a voice screaming to him from a distance. It was Aletha, in her strange language. But he could not see her. Was she—?

Then he caught it, veered, and a second later flung himself down behind a large boulder beside Aletha. They were still in the lighted area but protected completely behind the rock's long, slanting shadow. Safe for the moment. Rand saw the ground at their left suddenly smoke and seethe. The trail of invisible fire moved toward their rock. The tower-men had seen the two dive down behind the rock, would try to rout them out. Rand put a protective arm around the trembling, pale girl and waited for the end.

But the smoking trail ended abruptly before it reached their rock. Sudden realization smote Rand. It meant that they had discovered Curwood's racing figure at the other end—were swinging the beam toward him—

With one sharp, peremptory word to the girl, Rand sprang erect, leaped out into the open glare, waved his arms, shrieked, anything to attract their attention to him—

Allan Rand screamed in triumph as he felt an exquisite flame bathe his body. His clothing puffed into instant vapor, searing his flesh. The horrible, invisible fire ate into his vitals, made him dance and writhe. He knew then, with a supernal second-sight, that this act had given Curwood another few seconds of grace—had assured him of escape—

The golden-haired girl behind the rock put her hands to her eyes, sobbing. Then, driven by instinct, she jumped from her place of concealment and raced fleet-footed the remaining distance toward the beckoning arms of cool shadow ahead—toward safety.

Tom Curwood, half mad with the suspense of his companions' unknown fate, ran most of the way to their parked airplane, arriving an hour later as early dawn tinged the eastern sky with crimson. Eagerly he started the motors, let them warm up. He placed the four sticks of dynamite remaining from their supply in the second pilot seat, sat himself in the first.

The Douglas thundered into the air, plunged for the valley. He cut the throttle and made a wide, almost noiseless circle over the valley, five minutes later. He counted the little specks of black on the slope—four! One had been saved! But four had died! His plane soared over the center of the valley, directly over the tower and ship. He could see alarmed, scurrying figures stare up at him. Several were heading for the ship. If they once got into it and soared up to meet him—

Curwood grasped the first stick of dynamite, shoved it through the opened panel in the cabin floor. "For the Twelve!" he shouted aloud. Another went through. "For you, Ramon!"

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Again a stick dropped. "For civilization!"

The fourth stick hurtled down toward the tower. "For the four that died!"

He watched for a moment. Now the first stick had arrived, and with graceful slow-motion, the central tower collapsed, undermined at the base. Its heavy metal girders fell athwart the ovoid ship just as it trembled from the ground, bowling it over. The second stick that landed flung jagged blocks of stone from the nearest building, ramming the ship mercilessly.

The third stick tore the roof of the next building gapingly open, revealing the golden room in which Ramon had taunted them the day before. Curwood allowed himself to believe that it had ripped Ramon to bloody shreds. The fourth stick struck the huge sun-engine, its explosive force trebled by some fulmination within the quartz globes that released itself with tornadic violence.

Curwood then thought of himself, and sent the ship upward. At the top of a swift climb, he twisted his head and looked down. A pall of dust had settled over the scene of upflung debris. He could not see what pandemonium reigned below. Then his eyes popped open.

Something more was happening. The towering eastern wall of the valley, a sheer mass of rock, slowly split from its matrix and hurtled down into the valley. The dynamite blasts had begun a minor geologic cataclysm, through vibration and concussion. Curwood had a confused impression of the rest. He saw the upstanding lip of the valley's western side also teeter as great cracks appeared in the shuddering rock. A mighty thunder rumbled up from the scene as mountainous masses shifted, trembled, crashed. Curwood could not even hear the powerful roar of his propeller.

A half hour later, still circling, he gazed down on what looked like a great meteoric crater. His eyes were dazed at what they had witnessed. Innumerable tons of rock and dirt covered what had once been a teeming city. Nothing wrought by the hand of man showed through that jumbled earth-heap. It was unlikely that one single soul had escaped.

"God!" Curwood whispered to himself. "All those past-century men—Aletha's people—destroyed! But better so perhaps—"

An hour later, after parking the plane again and trudging back to the valley's crest, Tom Curwood approached with bated breath. Who was the one that had

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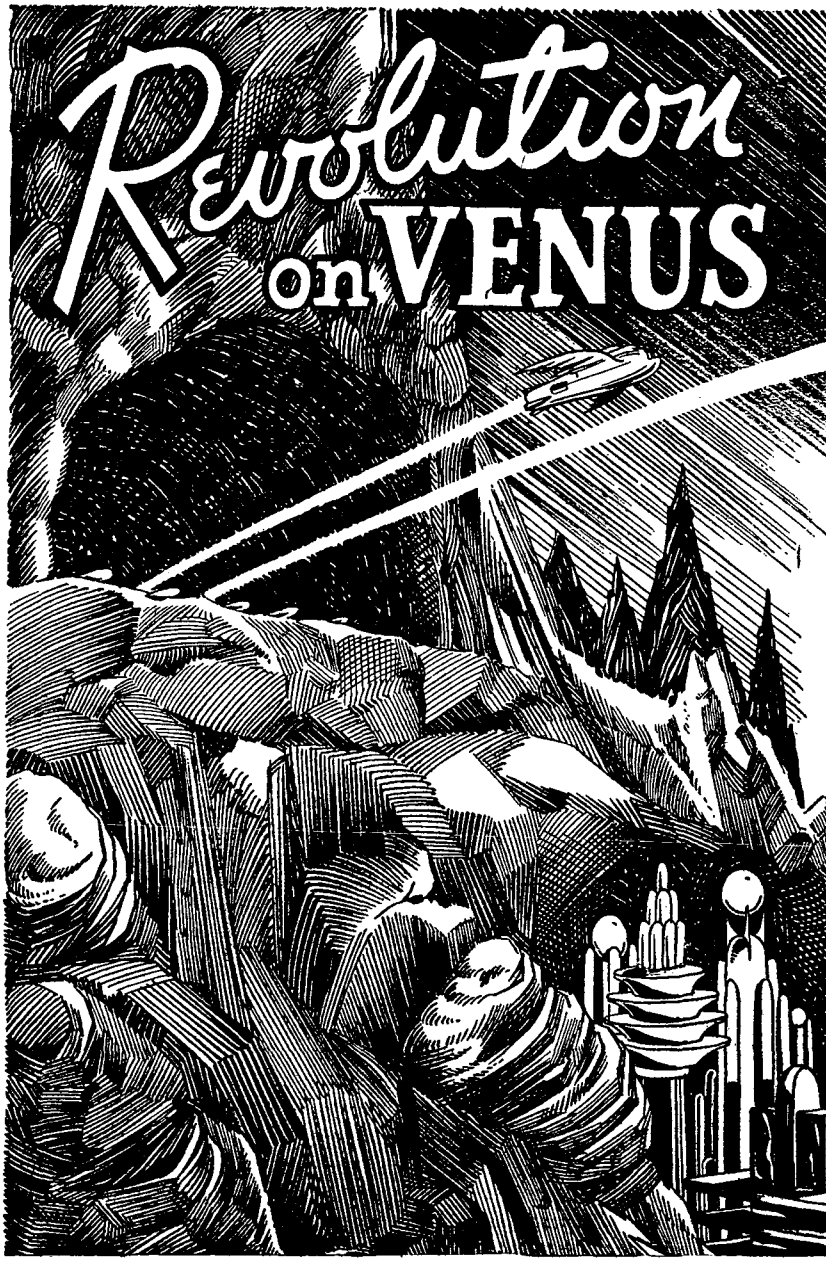

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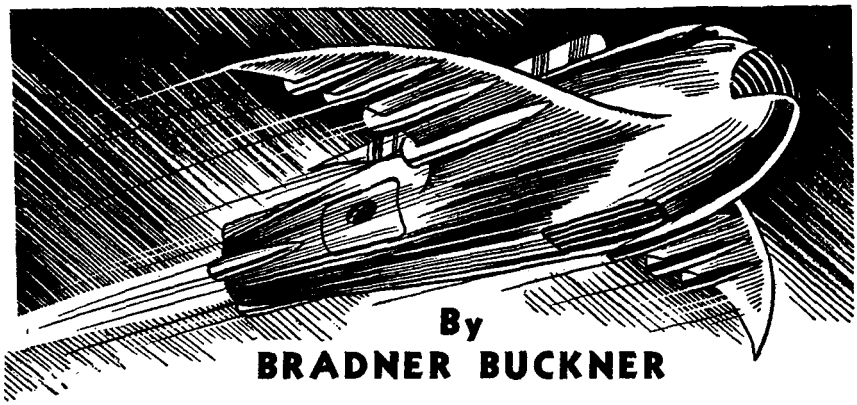


By
BRADNER BUCKNER

Racking pain, more terrible than he had ever experienced, engulfed Kent Stafford as Oak Harbold's fiendish metal band shrank about his head. But Stafford couldn't die . . . yet! He had to break this Dictator's power, even if all Venus rebelled!

CHAPTER I

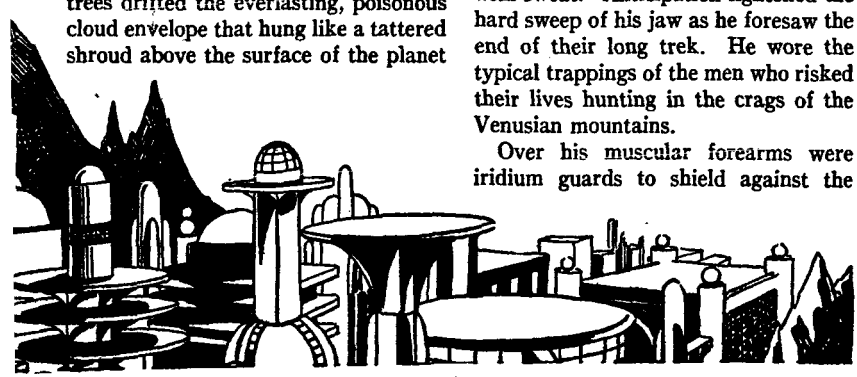
Death in the Forest

THE hot wind ripping down from the ridge was humid with the perpetual dampness of the high Venusian mountains. It brought flopping noises from the great leaves of the trees closing over the trail, carried the scream of a carnivore to the ears of the pair who swung leisurely up the steep, winding path.

High above the tops of the tallest trees drifted the everlasting, poisonous cloud envelope that hung like a tattered shroud above the surface of the planet Venus. A dingy gray, its lower surface sometimes split for a moment to reveal the yellow layer of deadly gas that had claimed the lives of so many like these two who had fought their way through and above it short days before.

They were a rugged, wild pair in a hostile country. Kent Stafford swung along ahead of his elderly partner, his bare torso, burned brown as a penny by the rays of a sun magnified by the moisture of the atmosphere, gleaming with sweat. Anticipation lightened the hard sweep of his jaw as he foresaw the end of their long trek. He wore the typical trappings of the men who risked their lives hunting in the crags of the Venusian mountains.

Over his muscular forearms were iridium guards to shield against the



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gouging of rocks. Tough breeches protected his legs, ending in metal-ribbed boots. Before him labored a long line of rugged little pack animals—strange animals, with the body of an Earthian antelope but scarcely bigger than a large dog. Clinging to their brown sides were heavy packs.

Now a sudden change of wind carried an odor of sulphur to their nostrils. Cap'n Hedricks, Kent's hardy old partner, uttered a glad oath.

"There it is!" he swore. "That sickening, nose-ticklin' smell that always makes you want to cuss—or cry with joy! Three hours and we'll be in Hila Fonda, hoistin' a long one to the mountains we can't live in . . . or without!" His blue eyes, as bright as the sun seen through the port of a space ship, glittered expectantly.

"Three days, and we'll be on our way back to Earth with the biggest load of vuldar feathers taken out of the interior yet!" Kent exclaimed. His eyes were on the bulging packs. Within them were the prized vuldar feathers for which wealthy women on Earth paid unbelievable prices.*

Kent's muscle-ribbed chest deepened to a sigh of satisfaction . . . and froze that way, as a hoarse scream drifted down from the ridge. His glance flashed along the rocky, tree-cloaked hill top. A stir of movement caught his eye. "That's no hungry *ardak* hunting," he shot at Hedricks. "Let's have a look!"

A barked command brought the pack train to a stop. Stafford's broad form catapulted forward, Cap'n at his heels. Death had been in that scream . . . and for intruders, danger, perhaps. Strange and sudden things happened in the Beryllium range. But there was no hesitation in the swift response of the hunters; if fear was an element in their natures, they would not have survived their first trip into the interior years ago.

It was a full life the proud clan of vuldar traders led, one that saw men skyrocketing to wealth in a single trip, or finding unmarked graves in the blue granite scarps back of Hila Fonda. For if any one being could be said to own the wild frontier of the planet, it was Death.

Death walked with them when they forced their way through pest-laden jungles, bridging streams it would have been fatal to touch because of their chemical properties. Death was with them as they started the precipitous climb from the lowlands to the twenty-five thousand foot towers of virgin rock. And there was not a hunter whose eyes were not hard and bitter as he covered his body with foul-smelling grease and climbed into the yellow layer of death-clouds.

There was fluorine in those clouds . . . fluorine, the greenish-yellow gas which cuts glass and lead—anything but the wax base of their protective grease. Their glass oxygen helmets had to be covered with a transparent cover of the stuff to protect them. And if they made it to the thinner clouds above, where the sun's rays were unmerciful, the battle was only beginning.

Here they relied from day to day on high-power pistols capable of shooting a mile, for not only were they hunting the voracious vuldars—the vuldars were hunting them! They grew to dread that sudden hiss of wind through mighty wings, the black shadows that foretold the swooping dive of a flock of killers.

Then they would shuffle their feet for

These plumes from the bodies of the rapacious Venusian bird which resemble the condor, are the most beautiful things on a planet full of the weirdly beautiful. The flame with every color of the rainbow, glisten in the dim sunlight like burnished gold and silver. Venusians look upon them with respect and reverence; Earthmen admire them and seek them for the thousand dollars the plumage of a single bird brings.—Author.

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firm holds in the rubble, jack loads into their guns—and pray. Random shots were useless. The heads of the birds must be picked off neatly to protect the feathers. And if a hunter missed or his gun jammed— Well, there was less competition for the others after that.

NOW a second scream brought Kent hurrying from the trail into the spongy growth matting the floor of a shadowy clearing. In a flash he was bending over a man who lay on the ground digging into the carpet with crooked fingers.

Hedricks had come up blowing. "A Venusian!" he broke out. "And the big feller's about done for, ain't he?" Concern traced fine lines about his eyes.

Stafford got the giant onto his back and stared into the brown face. He was about seven feet tall, even larger than the average native. Across his forehead was a tight metal band. Words came in wheezing gasps from his lips: "This is—the way—Harbold pays!"

The eyes of the traders locked together. "Harbold!" snarled Kent. "What's that renegade space pirate puttin' his evil mind to now?" He shook the man gently. "What is it? What's wrong with you, boy?"

Green eyes showed behind pain-tightened lids for a moment. Her fingers brushed the metal band. Abruptly, he screamed and bit his lips against the agony. Then his chest was heaving terribly, his throat convulsing with an ominous rattle.

"Lord, it's that band!" Kent gasped. "It's metal, but the thing's shrinking!"

Gingerly he touched the metal, found it rigid despite the fact that it was visibly growing smaller. Hedrick's head collided with his as both bent over the dying man. With every labored gasp the man grew weaker. Stafford tried to get his knife beneath the circlet.

He groaned with despair. Then, hastily, his blade commenced sawing on the gleaming ribbon. He was still frantically chipping the edge off his knife when he realized the form beneath him was motionless. He rocked back on his heels.

"Dead," he murmured. Absently he thrust the knife back in its sheath. "Medieval torture, it looks like. Cap'n, who in hell would . . . ?" His gaze followed the older man's, back to the still figure as he read interest in it.

Hedrick's stubby forefinger traced the inscription on the murderous band. In three languages—Martian, Venusian, and English—the same words were repeated: "Thus with all traitors!"

They looked at each other in silence. And then, because both were mystified and wanted to think, they retained that silence. Stolidly they buried the native and went back to the pack train.

No darker than Kent Stafford's thoughts were the pools of shadow they trudged through as they fought to the top of the last rise. He was recalling the unscrupulous trader and renegade whose name had cursed the Venusian last moments—Oak Harbold. He and Harbold were enemies of long, deeply rooted standing.

Kent's nature was revolted by the double-dealing ways of the big Earthman. In a world where man-made laws had not yet arrived, he took every advantage of the situation. The ingenuous natives were simple enough to take his pauper's wages to do the vuldar hunting he steered clear of. He paid them barely enough to live on; yet he received thousands of dollars monthly from the sale of the plumes they fought and died for. Men like Hedrick and Stafford watched his rise with contempt.

They topped the ridge, anxious for their first glimpse of Hila Fonda in six

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months. Even as they surmounted the rocks and stood looking down on the metropolis of three worlds, a rocket ship flamed from the landing field at its edge and arced into space. It was startling, and, somehow, ominous.

Kent's blood grew warmer as his glance dwelt on the city. Even from here the two sections of it were plain; The square, purplish buildings that formed the Venusian quarter, a close-crowded heap of crooked structures; flanking it, the Martian-Earthian quarter, a square of somewhat taller, white buildings.

Hila Fonda was built partly on the slope of the foothills, and beyond it, stretching a way into measureless miles of green, lay the Sea of Tarth. The long white combers battered ceaselessly at the yellow ribbon of sand separating city and ocean. Northeast was the smelter which had given rise to the odor of sulphur.

The metropolis was a grateful sight to their eyes: yet Kent found himself inwardly disturbed. "Back again," he murmured darkly. "Back to civilization—and what?"

CHAPTER II

The Devil's Playground

AS they made their way through the teeming streets an hour later, they were conscious of the curious glances that followed them. Unhurriedly they made their way to their private hangar at the landing field on the shore a half mile farther.

Men of every Earthly and Martian race thronged the narrow, dingy streets. Adventurers rubbed shoulders with criminals exiled from Earth or Mars. Marooned space tramps hung about saloons in search of free drinks. The high laughter of women came at intervals from shadowy doorways.

Everywhere there was dirt and squalor. The vices of three worlds made Hila Fonda a pest-hole of iniquity. Half the population worked in the vast Clayton iridium mines northeast of the city; a few hardy individuals went out on sporadic hunting expeditions. The rest of the populace who worked at all sold pleasure of some sort or another. In Hila Fonda, joy was king, and sin was his subaltern.

Kent's pace speeded up as he sighted their hangar at the end of the street, all thoughts but anticipation of a quick trip back to earth crowded from his mind.

Abruptly, he was spinning about as a voice rapped: "Halt!"

His startled gaze swept six burly figures in green and gold uniforms. A tight grin played over his lips. "What's the idea, Woods?" he drawled as the lanky, hard-faced leader stalked up. "Hallowe'en?"

The ex-trader's features remained frozen. But under his long, broken nose the small mouth creased tighter. "What's in the packs?" he shot back.

Stafford's eyes ran up and down the other's form. Only by the slight stiffening of his chest muscles was his resentment evident. "Rocks and boards," he gave back at last. "Me an' the Cap'n are building us a house."

Danger flamed in the amber eyes. But before he could speak, Hedricks had cut in.

"Just what you'd suppose," he snapped. "Vuldar plumes. Now get the hell—"

"Permits?" The other five men closed in a little tighter.

"Permits—?" Kent looked at Cap'n in sudden suspicion. "Since when did law and order come to Hila Fonda in the way of hunting licenses? I think we've been away too long, Cap'n."

"Healthier for you if you'd stayed

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away longer," Woods pointed out. "You two are under arrest for trappin' without a license! Take care of the packs, Bragg."

A stiff shock put Kent back on his heels. Mystery was in the air, and the scent of it was in his nostrils. He put out a hand to stay the Cap'n as the old trader lurched forward angrily.

"Arrest away," he breathed. "This promises to be interesting. And I'll miss my guess if Oak Harbold ain't in the deal somewhere!"

HARBOLD *was* in the deal.

He sat smiling thinly behind a metal desk in his office. Like the rest of the ancient buildings that housed his ships and wares, the office was dirty and poorly ventilated. Although Kent knew the interplanetary shipper was worth around a million dollars, there was an air of shoddiness and disrepute about the place. And the most disreputable thing in the office was Harbold, himself.

His coarse, slightly puffy features were a unique blending of fox-like craft and the brutality of a gorilla. A network of broken veins ruddied his cheeks, and his thick lips smirked loosely. His mouth was too quick to smile, his eyes too slow. Greenish flecks in the black eyes gave them a piercing quality.

"So the honest huntin' men thought they could get by without a license," he greeted them. "Well, you've bought yourself some trouble. Hila Fonda's grown plenty unfriendly to you wholesale vuldar butchers."

Stafford hooked his thumbs over his belt. "Now say it so we can understand it," he gave back.

A new, nasal voice intruded, drawing the traders' eyes. They met the ferret features of wizened Hack Bacon, another who had found it easier to pay native help to do his work. "He means your kind has damn' near ruined the vuldar trade," he challenged. "Slaughterin' the birds by the hundred till they're scarce as gold nuggets." Bacon's skinny frame was clothed in the most expensive hunter's outfit.

Cap'n Hedricks snarled a Venusian oath. "You got the nerve of a brass monkey, Bacon," he choked. "If you had the guts to get out an' soil those pretty pants and riggin's, you know the vuldars are so thick you can't breathe without getting a lungful of feathers! Butchers—!" His words trailed off into incoherent curses.

Hatred flashed into Harbold's black eyes. "We've had other reports from our hunters," he flared. "Vuldars got so scarce a few months back that the honest men like Roddok and Bacon and Woods, here, asked me to do something about it."

Roddok, an elongated, gray-eyed Martian, smiled blandly, "You began to worry us, takin' our livelihood like that. Hell, we've got to live, you know!"

"Why?" Kent drawled icily.

Harbold ignored the thick sarcasm in his voice. "Even the city was so bad you could smell it back on earth. Something had to be done to straighten things out here, as well as curb you unscrupulous hunters."

He leaned back in the chair, spread his hairy hands on the desk. "It's a different place you've come back to, Stafford. I've got a hundred armed police keepin' tabs on things. We've got law in Hila Fonda—and I'm it!"

Somehow Kent Stafford sensed the closing jaws of a trap. The smug grins on the faces of the uniformed renegades who were called police, the complacent look of power on Harbold's heavy features— He broke off the spell. "I've seen a little of your law," he responded

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sourly. "More drunks in the streets than ever, more playgirls per block—and God only knows how many new vices brought in from home or Mars. You're doin' a swell job. The only thing I'm wondering about is this: Why did they pick the rottenest crook in three worlds to straighten out this city?"

Anger rushed through Harbold's visage, bringing dangerous highlights to his eyes. His hand jerked at a drawer, took out a couple of metal rings, one bronze, one silver. Quickly he fitted one inside the other, his eyes on Stafford as he did so. And suddenly Kent realized they were shrinking, as though their union had produced some strange chemical action.

In the swift looks of shock that struck his prisoners, the renegade leader read their recognition of the deadly weapon. He laughed a short, harsh note. "For a man in your spot, you wear an awful big mouth," he taunted. "I mighta let you off with just attaching your packs, but I ain't sure it's safe to have your type running around loose. I'll hold Hedrick for trial. But you've already sentenced yourself, Stafford." Abruptly he was coming around the desk. His face came close to Kent's. Into a taut silence, his words dropped slowly: "Got anything to say—*before I give you the same treatment that Venusian got?*"

CHAPTER III

Ann Clayton

THE fire in Kent's breast seemed to die out, then it was flaring up. He drew back a fist to crash into Harbold's face, and in the same instant strong hands seized him. Disregarding the officers, he snarled.

"Plenty! This is no attempt at law and order, Harbold—it's out and out piracy. The natives must be simpler than I thought they were, if they let you appoint yourself judge, jury, and executioner. You've got Hila Fonda on the fire, and you won't be satisfied till you've got every drop of juice out of it. Permits! Traitors! Your permits are nothing but a way of killing free trade, and you brand anyone a traitor who opposes you. Well, here's one pair that doesn't lie down and lick your boots!"

With the angry crescendo of his voice, he snapped into action. His arms flew up and around, tearing loose the grasps of Bacon and Woods. Cap'n was yelling fierce defiance as he tore into another renegade. Like two maddened wolves, Kent and his old partner ripped into the four.

Blood was on Kent's hands, on his face, in his brain. He smashed, jabbed, clubbed, shouted. Momentarily he awaited the rending impact if incendiary bullets which would rip into his body and burn until a grateful death took him. But they did not come; Harbold was saving him for a worse end, he supposed.

He saw the wiry, bean-pole frame of Woods loom up, and pulled back a fist to throw a vicious roundhouse at him. Some one caught that fist, twisted it behind him until a cry of pain tore from his lips. In that same instant he saw Cap'n stumble forward with blood streaming from his head, to crash into the desk and roll to the floor. Then blinding lights sheeted through his brain. Strength flowed from his body like meal from a split sack.

He spun dizzily into darkness, seeing one thing: the distorted countenance of Oak Harbold dancing before him. . . .

PAIN swam interminably through Kent's mind, and it was pain that dragged him back to reality. He had

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known headaches before, but nothing had approached the engulfing, blinding anguish that convulsed his brain now.

His heavy lids dragged open. The dim Venusian sunlight burned his eyeballs. Suddenly he raised his hand to his head. His heart leaped as he felt a cold band of metal already sunken into his forehead!

Then Woods' face materialized. In the moment before the swart countenance broke into savage amusement, Kent saw where he was. He was at the mouth of the crooked street of filth and sordidness that gave into the Venusian quarter. At each side was a guard who had been dragging him along.

"You been so damned loud about giving the natives fair wages," Woods smirked, "maybe they'll repay the debt now! Don't ask help of nobody else. It's against the law to try to help anybody wearing the collar. Get goin'!"

Rude hands threw him through the gate. He reeled into a wall and crashed to the gray dust of the street. Somehow he fought his way up and went stumbling along the street. With every step his agony mounted, but he tore at the band with futile fingers and reeled ahead. It would be death to remain; perhaps someone—

There was a raggedness in Kent's heart that rivaled the bone-crushing torture of his body. It came to him that a whole world of helpless natives would soon be under the ruthless tyranny of Harbold. He found it in him to realize how small his own death would seem against the hundreds who would die before the renegade got the complete control he was after.

A new spasm racked him. He fell against the front of a building and shot a desperate glance down the street. The narrow, crooked passage climbed steeply away from him. Five-story buildings of the purple plaster which predominated seemed almost to touch overhead. The uneven street was deserted, except for gaunt creatures like wolfhounds—Venusian dogs.

In the next moment Kent was running ahead. Three tall, brown-skinned figures had caught his eye in the shadows beneath an overhead foot-bridge. He fell to the street before them, climbed to his feet and held his head. "Head!" he muttered. "God, it's caving in. . . . Help—"

A brown hand lashed out to smash against his cheek. "Damned Earthman!" the Venusian muttered. "Does your murdering breed help us?"

Before Stafford could recover from his shock, the glint of a blade arrested his attention. One of the others slid close. "Well give him help—" he snarled. "Earthmen help!"

THERE was strength enough in Stafford's arm to catch the plunging hand and wrest the blade loose. But the effort cost him a tremendous amount of energy. Bewildered, angry, sick, he staggered away. A shout beat up behind his running figure.

In a single instant, the quarter that had been a place of silence and mystery erupted into life. From every door and furtive alley moved tall, threatening figures. Kent stopped. A score of Venusians swam before his gaze. He creased his bloodless lips tighter. What was wrong here? The friendly natives were openly hostile, bent on killing him, perhaps! Yet, only a few months before, they had been happy and friendly as children.

Now he ducked swiftly into an alley and careened down it. It was no wider than five or six feet, and so dark he stumbled about in the slimy gutter that flowed through it. The mob had become in his mind a huge noise, that clamored about his pounding head with

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fiendish persistence. Abruptly he sprang into the next street.

But the lane was already filling with hard-faced Venusians who had heard the cries. "Earthman! Damned Earthman!"

The epithet burst from a hundred throats to smash at his brain. The mob bore down on him relentlessly. He fought back the narcotic effect of his pain. Even in perfect condition he would have been in a difficult spot with such odds against him. But now—he was sick all through . . . he was dying.

Suddenly Kent realized he was tired of fighting. Senseless to resist the death that would be more merciful than the torture of the collar. He found a doorway and backed into it. His bitter laughter mocked the mob.

"Come on!" he raged. "But I'll take the first ten with me!" Muscles ran ripplingly across his chest as he set himself, fists on hips. His face burned with a fierceness that slowed them down.

Then they were rushing on with renewed speed as the alley spewed hoarsely shouting Venusians. The giants shimmered in his gaze; the end was closer than he had known. His flashing fists found two unprotected jaws and brought their owners down. They were closing in fast, suffocating him. Fists pounded him until he was weak and sick.

Then, like a bell rung suddenly, a woman's voice sheared the crowd sounds. The effect was magical: the Venusians fell back hurriedly to form a path for her. And now the clouds of death were settling rapidly about Stafford. On his knees, he was able to glimpse only a white cameo of a face framed in wavy brown hair, a small figure in green and white.

Darkness caught him up in invisible arms before he could see more.

CHAPTER IV

City of Death

FOR the second time in a space of hours he struggled back to consciousness. But this time the return was accompanied by a sense of peace and restfulness. He lay for a long time without desiring to open his eyes. His head didn't ache any longer. His limbs were relaxed. A low voice finally brought his lids up to scan the surroundings.

The ceiling over him was low, rippled with shadows thrown by guttering lamps. He lay in one of the bunks that lined three walls of the room. One swift-traveling glance showed him four men in chairs around a table. The clacking of ivory told him a game of Venusian backgammon was going on. Beyond them, in a bunk across from Kent, sprawled a relaxed figure regarding him lazily through slitted lids.

Again the low voice came: "A quick recovery, Mr. Stafford."

With the amused tones, Kent was sitting up hurriedly and swinging his legs over the edge of the bunk. His gaze came into focus on the same face he had seen as he went down in the street. Even in these strange circumstances, he found it in him to admire the beauty of the girl who sat swinging her legs carelessly as she sat on a bunk beside him.

Only on Earth could such a complexion as hers be found, and only in America did girls have such warm eyes and lips. Lustrous brown hair came to her shoulders, and friendly blue eyes made his blood pound faster. Her small figure was dressed in a short-sleeved green jacket and the short skirt worn by Venusian women.

Staring steadily at her, Stafford found recollection stirring within him.

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"I—I know you, don't I?" he put thoughtfully.

"You should. I was in my father's office the day you refused the small fortune he offered you to head his transport fleet!"

"Ann Clayton!" Kent found his feet and regarded her in surprise. Marshall Clayton owned the vast iridium mines northeast of the city. Over a year ago he had tried to sell Stafford on the idea of taking a thousand dollar a month salary to supervise the shipping of valuable loads of iridium back to Earth and Mars. Constant raids on his ships had depleted his profits until he decided a fighter was more needed in his crew of officers than mere navigators. But Kent had decided in favor of the more rigorous life he had known for ten years.

The girl laughed softly. "How is your head now?" she asked.

"My head—!" Kent's hand went up to discover nothing remained of the death collar but a furrow where it had lain! "You—you got it off?"

"With Roddok's help."

The words jerked the hunter's gaze to the tall, slender figure in green, lazing in the bunk across the room. Anger flashed into his mind, then fell away as he considered her words. "But you helped put the thing on—!" he muttered. "Now you take it off. What's the idea?"

The Martian laughed: "I'm on two payrolls," he smiled. "But you got yourself lost in the native quarter so fast I was almost too late in finding you."

"Roddok's my undercover man," Ann Clayton explained. "When he brought word that you'd been left in the Venusian quarter to die or be killed, I hurried out to get you. I found you just in time. The natives will kill any foreigner they catch alone, unless I, or Agara, my mine superintendent, is with him.

"You could have taken the band off yourself, if you'd known how. The two metals unscrew, and immediately stop contracting. The bronze is cut off after that."

The lines of puzzlement pinched deeper about his eyes. He let himself sag onto the bunk again. "My head's as dizzy as though the collar were still on it," he admitted. "Six months ago Hila Fonda was a happy, sinful bit of hell that was about as furtive as a stray pup. Now I hear talk about undercover men, traitors, hostile natives . . . what's the answer?"

KENT was conscious of their gazes on him. The rattle of ivory had chopped off. Agara, the Venusian who had charge of all the Clayton mines, pushed his chips away angrily. His flat, brown features twisted. There was something almost threatening in the way he fixed his gaze on the other.

"You're in a city where men wear chains, Kent," he said harshly. "Your people keep out of trouble by walking light and not having ideas. We Venusians have come to hate the whites because Oak Harbold is white. And who can blame us? Harbold has levied taxes on half what my men make working in the mines. So—they are starving. He refuses to give Miss Clayton clearance papers on her ships so she can't sell the metal, and the workers go unpaid."

Stafford's blood grew warmer. "But Clayton! Why does he stand for Harbold's bullying?"

Ann Clayton's eyes dropped. "My father is dead. A mine cave-in—so they said."

Kent found no words to express his shock and sorrow. Marshal Clayton had been his kind of man . . . a fight-

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ing man. Because of that, he was dead. "Your father was the sort Hila Fonda needs," his voice came quietly. "But you, Ann—you can't stay here alone. You aren't safe."

Proudly her eyes flashed over the four giant natives and Roddok. "I have friends," she pointed out. "Every Venusian supports me and my friends. And as long as I have strength to fight, I'll stay here and battle Oak Harbold!"

"All of Marsh Clayton didn't die," Kent murmured. Suddenly, with icy coldness, he recalled the Cap'n.

"I've got to get back there," he ground out. "Cap'n may be dead already. Harbold had some reason for keeping him."

"He did—which is why he is safe." The Martian was on his feet, lighting a cigarette brought across millions of miles from Earth. "I convinced Harbold you might have a secret cache of vuldar feathers somewhere, and he kept Hedrick to sweat the information out of him. But don't excite yourself—he is merely going to starve him until he gives in."

Stafford held his gaze steadily on the thin, regular features. The thought came into his mind that beneath the unobtrusive exterior was a loyal spirit.

"Tonight you must rest," Roddok continued. "By tomorrow night I'll have the lay of the building he's taken him to. Then we can strike."

"Strike!" Kent smashed a knotted fist into his palm. "We'll strike and keep on striking until Harbold's octopus hold is broken. Or else we'll go down knowing it was a great old fight while it lasted!"

CHAPTER V

Rescue—And Capture

RENEWED strength came to Kent with the birth of the new day. Hour by hour he paced about the small room, impatiently eager to be on the trail back. It was agony to confine himself to four walls, with so much to be done outside. Then, toward evening, came quick footsteps in the hall.

Ann admitted Roddok. "It's set," he announced grimly. "Come here."

He led the way to the window, let up the shade on the darkening city. Ann pressed close to Kent, following with him the Martian's pointing finger. They made out the slender form of a tall building across the city. Near the top, lights gleamed in windows.

Roddock said: "Your friend is there. He's expecting us any time."

"But how do we get in?" Kent wanted to know. "That's ten stories up. We aren't going by elevator, are we?"

The Martian's purple-gray eyes appraised his muscular limbs. "Can you climb?"

"I could scale an iceberg, if the Cap'n were at the top," Stafford assured him.

"Then you'll climb," Roddok nodded. He pressed a gun into his hand. "You'll need this. Let's go."

But a restraining hand clutched Kent's wrist as he swung toward the door. The look in Ann's eyes were not the fighting spirit of last night. It was something more feminine, something softer. "You'll watch out for the night guards?" she whispered.

Kent's jaw went hard. "I'll watch for them," he promised somberly, shoving his gun under his belt. Then his lips formed a quizzical smile. "Why, Ann—if a man didn't know better, he'd think you were downright worried about me!"

Her reply, not entirely satisfactory, was still in his ears as they left: "Perhaps I am. I need men like you—lots of them!"

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THE ancient warehouse in which Hedrick was confined loomed high and dark from a cluster of smaller buildings. A small sprinkling of lighted windows shone near the top.

Kent pressed back with Roddok into the gloom of a doorway across from it. The nearby crashing of the sea on the yellow sand was in his ears, and the pulsing of his own heart. As far as he could see in either direction, the street was deserted.

The Martian's words riveted his attention on the warehouse, then. "It's built like a U," he was whispering, "with Hedrick's room at the end of one leg. Inside the U, at the very back, the bricks are old and looser than anywhere else. It may be you can get finger- and foot-holds. Climb to the tenth story and get in a window. Come back the same way."

Kent nodded slowly and drew a deep breath. With Roddok's "Good luck!" in his ears, he started across the street. Scarcely had he reached the middle of it when voices broke the silence and lights swung around the nearby corner. Kent stood frozen with horror. Guards! If they had seen him—!

Three quick strides carried him to the warehouse shadows. Then he was forcing back against the wall, waiting . . .

In a moment the voices resolved themselves into a drunken discord of music. "Drunks!" breathed Stafford, and his shoulders sagged with relief. The quartet wore the uniforms of rocket men on one of the great sky-liners. Oblivious to the four sharp eyes and two gun-muzzles that followed them, they careened on, singing raucously of the "Black-Eyed Sky-Maids of Space."

Kent twirled, trod hastily down the space between two small buildings. Sooner than he expected, he was staring into the black patio within the U of the warehouse. His keen gaze raked it. Cautiously he bore across the intervening distance and made for the section Roddok had mentioned. Then he was jerking about with a startled gasp on his lips.

The guard had loomed up so unexpectedly that Stafford was caught flat-footed. "Who is it?" growled the watchman.

There was a moment in which Kent cursed himself for trusting Roddok. But with the beam of light from the man's torch, he forgot everything but the need for speed and agility.

"Stafford!" The word was wrung from the man's lips in a choked gasp. And Kent recognized, with a fierce thrill, the nasal tones of Woods.

"Yeah—back from the dead!" Kent clipped, and sprang for him. His body was rigid with the knowledge that he must shoot first, and that that shot must not be heard. The ugly bore of his weapon sank deep into the renegade's slack belly. Kent pulled the trigger.

There was a sharp pop, a groan that Kent's hand stopped. The muffling of the gun had been successful, and Stafford knew, as seconds hammered through him, that his split second advantage had prevented Woods from firing. He watched the dead man sag down. With a cold shock he saw how close he had been to death; the guard's gun was already cocked. Only his swiftness had saved him.

He made his way to the wall and groped until he discovered the loose section of bricks. He knew instantly why these bricks were loose and the others firm; a drain on the roof spilled rain water over at this point, and the erosion of years had weakened the mortar. But as he ran skilled fingers over the softened material, his mouth tightened.

It was one step short of suicide to

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ascend by them. Crumbling plaster and brick came out by the handful as he dug. But the thought of Cap'n starving up there routed caution from his mind. He jammed the gun back under his belt and started up.

THE stories fell away from him in a timeless interval of shaling plaster, probing, bleeding fingers, and cramping muscles. Kent fought his way higher. He had no fear of the steep climb, but the crumbling bricks struck fear into him.

In some manner he gained the top floor, rigid with alarm. A window beckoned invitingly. Weakened fingers slipped over the sill. And now his nerves exploded as the room he was staring into blazed with sudden light. Black eyes, behind the barrel of an incendiary pistol, regarded him frigidly.

"A long climb, fella," the man rasped. "Too bad it had to end this way!"

Without the usual warning of tensed features, the man blazed three shots at him. The agony of seared flesh was in Kent. His eyes stung from the proximity of the muzzle-blast. Hatred nerved him to leap up as he realized he was somehow uninjured. Steel fingers closed like a trap about the Harbold man's wrist.

The sinews of Kent's bronzed back snapped and strained as he gave a quick tug on the captured arm. From the man's lips broke a hoarse scream of terror. Twice more he fired as he plunged through the window into space.

Kent was sickened by the babbling shrieks that came up to him, and shuddered to the smacking sound that terminated them. But he climbed in knowing that if he had any chance now, it lay in speed.

He sprang into the hall, tore down it to Hedrick's room. There was no guard before the door under which he could make out pale light. Evidently the man he had just met had left his post to intercept him. A single shot shattered the lock. In the next moment the door was swinging wide. . . .

Cap'n Hedrick's squat, dynamic form came out unhurriedly. He said only, "What's kept you, son?" But in the strength of his grasp was gratitude and relief.

Kent grinned. "Had to leave my card with a couple of doormen. Well, shall we stay here and wait for trouble, or go look it up?"

"Let's look it up. And then eat! I've ate up all the flooring, and was just startin' on the door knob when you got here."

Kent started a smile, then the humor vanished under the pressure of the situation. "We've got the chance of a canary with a vuldar of coming out alive, but I'm ready if you are. We'll go the front way. The courtyard will be clogged with hell-raisers by now."

The way down was a lot easier than the way up, but as they prepared to go out the front door into the now swarming street, both men were grim. Harbold's strident tones knifed the babble. Everywhere were the green uniforms of guards. Of Roddok there was no sign whatever. He had melted with the first shot, Kent decided. And again a slow suspicion revolved in his mind.

They slid into the street. Kent played his act coolly, mingling with the clamoring Martians and Earthmen and adding his voice to the others. But slowly, purposefully, he inched through them. Suddenly he hissed over his shoulder, "Here we go!"

His broad shoulders hunched as he made for the yawning mouth of an alley. Cap'n's steps echoed his own running footfalls. They gained the alley and sprang down it. But not until

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the sounds of the crowd died out did their pace slacken a fraction.

Black storm clouds had been gathering beneath the perpetual envelope of vapor during the night, and now, as they gained the native quarter, the first huge, pelting drops splattered in the dust of the streets. Soon the night sky was sluicing angry torrents down upon the city, scouring the filthy streets clean.

But Kent Stafford was thinking, as they swung into their hideout, that no amount of rain could wash out the blood that had been spilled, and would be spilled before this ghastly business was over.

ALL the rest of that night the three of them—Ann, Kent, and Hendricks—watched the constant searching parties rush through the crooked streets. Behind them sounded the rattling of backgammon pieces as the impassive Venusian guards played on, disregarding the turmoil without.

Constantly the thought recurred to Kent that Roddok was back of the miscarriage of his plans. Woods and the other men had been on the alert from the opening play, as though they had expected him. Yet they thought he was dead. Only the blonde Martian knew otherwise.

The hours crept on, and yet Roddok did not come. The black sky thinned to a dirty gray, as another grim dawn broke over Hila Fonda. It was when the first sickly half-light had filtered through the slanting streaks of rain that Ann Clayton turned from the window with a little gasp.

"Kent!" she called tensely. He looked up from the chair. "There's a man down there in the street," her voice went on tightly. "I don't know, but I think he's —dead."

Stafford shoved his bulk wearily out of the chair. "There'll be a lot of 'em dead after this night. Harbold'll drag all the rotten aces out of his sleeve, now. I'll go look."

He was not gone long, but when he returned from dragging the limp figure into a doorway out of the rain, his face was white. "It was Roddok," he said strangely. "He's—come back. God forgive me the thoughts I had." He passed his hand over his eyes as though suddenly tired. "I found this on him. Read it."

Hendricks took the note and scanned it. He had aged when he glanced up once more. In Harbold's sprawling characters he had read: "Stafford: You got till night to come back alone and unarmed. If you aren't here then, I'll

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blow the whole damned Venusian quarter to hell. I can do it. Don't make me show you how!"

CHAPTER VI

The Last Chance

FOR a long time Kent stood at the window looking into the wet street. He was sick of it all, sick with knowledge that only his own life could save those of thousands of innocent natives. That Harbold could dynamite the city, he had no doubt whatever. Hila Fonda was an ancient city, of underground sewers and huge water-mains . . . ideal places to plant charges of deadly *argonite*, a Martian product a hundred times as powerful as trinitrotoluol, Earth's best.

Desperately he fought for another solution, when all the time he knew it was the only way. Then the sound of soft sobbing drove the gloom from his mind. Ann Clayton was a pathetic little huddle on one of the bunks, her soft brown hair hiding the hands that covered her face. Quietly Kent crossed to her, and sat beside her.

Completely unconscious of the strangeness of it, he let one brown hand steal about her waist and draw the trembling warmth of her against him. And just as simply, just as naturally, her own arms went about his shoulders, and she buried her face in the hollow of his neck.

"We've fought so long," she sobbed. "So many fine, brave men like Roddok have gone, and I kept thinking we would surely win out sometime. Last night I thought things were turning our way. And now . . . this!"

There were no words in Stafford to cheer her. The last shreds of his hope lay out there in the rain, as dead as the Martian.

"There was a million dollars worth of iridium waiting to go when Dad died," she went on tonelessly. "It's there yet. I suppose it'll stay there, until Harbold finds an excuse to take it." The slim shoulders shook. "Oh, Kent, Kent—what can I do alone, when men like you and Hedrick can't stop him?"

Stafford gave no sign that he had heard, but a new vigor stirred in him. He got up, stood poised in thought. Something in her words, something in the ceaseless rattle of rain on the windows, built anew the blaze of courage. Thoughts came tumbling into place in his mind. Abruptly he swung back to the girl.

"We're overlooking a good bet," he told her, and his glance included the others. "Hearing that rain gave me an idea. Where is the metal stored?"

"It's in the mines, in a locked tunnel," she replied. "Oh, I know what you're thinking, but it's no use. All my transport ships are guarded by Harbold, so we can't get the iridium off the planet anyway."

"But maybe they aren't guarded!" Kent cut in. "Harbold will know these Venusians won't stay in the city and take a chance on being blown to hell. He'll have all his men watching the gates to keep them in. For the time being he may forget the ships. And in this blinding rain we can easily sneak a hundred men over the north wall."

Ann's face brightened with anticipation of the plan. "You mean we'll load all the ships and leave before he knows what's happened! And—and then we can bring back a few battalions of interplanetary patrolmen and stop him for good!"

But Kent's eyes were suddenly avoiding her eager gaze. He shoved his hands in his pockets and walked slowly past the intent Venusians.

Ann followed him quickly. "Well, isn't that it?" she pressed.

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"Just about," he admitted. "Only I'm not going with you when you leave."

"You—you *what?*" the old hunter exploded. He gained his feet with a crash of metal-soled boots.

"I'm staying here," Kent repeated. "My leaving would be a death warrant for ten thousand Venusians. If I don't come out tonight, it will mean the greatest tragedy Venus has ever known. An Earthman brought this on the innocent natives, and it's right that an Earthman should stop it. I'm going back there alone."

The face of the giant Agara glowed with admiration. "Ten thousand opinions will be changed tonight," he murmured. "Even a brave man might shun what you say you will do. Your courage will reflect on your people, in the eyes of Venusians."

"But, Kent — you can't!" Ann pleaded. "There must be another way."

Stafford shook his head. "I've thought of every way. There's only one, for me to go back alone—but not unarmed," he added grimly.

"Nor you ain't going alone, either!" Cap'n vowed. "The pair of us are good for any hundred Harbolds from here to the Milky Way!"

"We'll see about that," Kent smiled. "But now we've got work ahead. Agara, can you round up pilots for every ship, and men to load them?"

"In an hour the best pilots and swampers in Hila Fonda will be waiting for you at the mines," the Venusian assured him. Without further orders, he left with his men.

At his departure, a brooding silence filled the room. With forced optimism, Kent brought a calloused hand down across his partner's back. "Well, I've got one more good day's work in me, anyhow," he concluded. "And I'm spoiling to be at it. But rain and fog and mud—what a helluva setting for a man to do his best work!"

THEY found the rain and fog a blessing once they had scaled the high old wall in the hilly northeast section of the quarter. The clouds seemed to have sunken with their own weight until they rested on the ground in a murky, wet blanket. Through it the three made their way unnoticed up the muddy road to the mines.

From behind them came the ceaseless roar of the ocean, crashing thunderously on the sand. Other sounds built through the rain to them from ahead. The clank of hammers and the screech of wheels on rusty rails. The muffled shouts of workers.

Suddenly the whole scene was revealed as the fog tore aside momentarily. Twenty gleaming, bullet shaped space ships formed a line before the hangars. A swarm of men came and went in the frantic business of readying them for the trip. Dozens of swampers huddled in the cold rain before the mine entrances.

Agara loomed out of the grayness. "Everything is ready," he said briskly. "If you'll unlock the storage tunnel, Miss Clayton, we can load the ships and be away in an hour."

The girl nodded, and they hastened behind her as her small form disappeared into the lighted tunnel. Luminous bars, set into the ceiling like railroad ties, gave ample illumination. Ann went down the main tunnel for a few hundred feet, then turned right into a narrower one. Almost instantly they plunged into a twisting, confusing route full of switchbacks and short elevator descents.

Kent marveled at her confidence in seeming to know exactly where she was going. Every tunnel appeared the same

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to him: low-ceilinged, with walls glittering from tiny bits of iridium. He asked her about it, and she glanced upward.

"If you walk exactly in the center of the tunnel," she explained, "you can see a tiny green light in the middle of each bar. Those lights indicate when you're on the right route."

Kent was still reflecting on Marshall Clayton's ingenuity in protecting his vast stores of the semi-precious metal when he had fresh reason to admire his thoroughness. Ann had stopped before a massive steel door. In her hand she held a dozen tiny gold bars like nails. One after another she placed the variously-formed keys into cleverly hidden locks. As the last one slid into place, the floor trembled slightly and the door slid back.

Now their eyes widened at sight of bar upon bar of iridium ingots—nearly a million dollars worth. Without any delay the burly natives began carrying them out. Each man could carry only four of the small bars, because of the great weight of the metal.

Hedricks and Kent both fell into line and got a load to carry up. Ann was waiting outside as they emerged. "Coming back up?" Kent asked her. "Or will you stay down here and keep dry?"

Her answer was vague. "No, I—there's something I must see about before I leave. I'm going down a little farther." She had left before Kent could frame any questions.

Finally, shrugging, Stafford fell back in line and began the long ascent.

Time slipped past unmarked. Hurried trips back and forth through the tunnels, brisk runs through the rain to the holds of the ships, and the clanging of closed doors that would not be opened again for weeks, occupied every man's attention, until suddenly they realized the last ship was loaded.

Agara stood breathless, near the largest of the transports. "Miss Clayton always pilots her own ship," he said hurriedly, nodding at the small, trim craft not far off. "It's ready to go. I'll fly in the flagship." His hand went out to Stafford and Hedrick in turn. "If I don't see you men again, let me say this now: No finer men have ever touched Venusian soil than you. Goodbye—good luck!"

Then he was gone, leaving them to stare at the doors which had closed behind him. From down the line of ships came a bright orange flame as a rocket tube was warmed up. Others sprang up like signal flames glowing in the mist.

Without warning there was an earth-shaking roar. A rocket blast mushroomed against the ground. A rush of air screamed over the city, tailing off into a windy sigh; the first ship was gone.

The hunters stood frozen as the entire fleet blazed crimson paths from the mines into the clouds. Kent's ears rang with the concussions. Apprehensively, he let his glance wander down into the city. Harbold must know now that something was going on. Time was short.

He started to turn, but in the midst of it he jerked back to Cap'n. His face was white and drawn. "Good Lord!" he blurted. "I forgot about Ann. She said she'd be up in a few minutes. *She's been gone over an hour!*"

CHAPTER VII

Out of Death—Victory!

THEIR countenances were blank with horror. Then Kent shook himself. "Watch her ship," he clipped. "It's her last chance for safety, if—if she isn't already . . ." He left the sentence hanging like a poised knife,

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and darted into the shaft.

His shouts rang emptily through the tunnels as he reached the storage room and fund no sign of her. Indecision chilled his limbs. Recalling the system of light-guides, he glanced up quickly and found the green indicators continued farther on.

He sprang ahead, calling to her as he went. The lights led him along a devious path, hundreds of feet farther into the bowels of the mountain. At last he stopped in desperation.

It was then that the small, weak cry reached him: "Kent! Kent!"

In the next moment he whirled, to discover her prone form. In a few seconds he was raising her from the ground in his arms. There was an ugly bruise on her forehead, and glancing down at the scattering of boulders on the floor, he wondered that the slide had not killed her.

Ann was speaking in a weak voice: "I came down to get Dad's strong-boxes out of the other vault. Everything he had was in them . . . deeds, bonds, cash. But when I started to open it, the slide started."

Stafford glanced briefly over the door, similar to the other, and noted the keys on the floor. "Thank God!" he murmured. "I was afraid you might have been caught in a cave-in—caught more than you were, I mean. If this stuff is necessary, let's get it out and hurry back. Your ship is ready."

He bent down to pick up her keys—and went rigid, as an alien sound intruded. It was unmistakably the report of a pistol. Kent straightened. His own gun came to his hand. And now he shouted, as a figure raced past the mouth of the tunnel.

"Cap'n!" he bellowed. "We're here! What's the . . ."

Hedricks reappeared, ran wildly towards them. "Harbold!" he gasped. "The bunch of 'em — forty-fifty — must've heard the rockets and come up the hill! We ain't got a chance. They're right behind me!"

Kent hefted his gun. "Then we won't ask a chance," he jerked. "We'll meet 'em and have it out right here. Ann, are you game, or would you rather we'd surrender?"

"You said before I was a lot like my father," her reply came. "I haven't changed."

A pounding of running feet reached them. The girl was first to move. "Down here there's another shaft," she said hastily. "A corner wouldn't make a bad shelter, would it?"

Behind the raggedly hewn wall they took up their post. They were not a moment too soon. Down the curving tunnel, at the spot they had just vacated, they heard Harbold's heavy tones calling a halt.

"They been here," he shouted. "Here's her keys. We'll bottle 'em up!"

"It ain't that easy!" Stafford shouted back, and his incendiary bullet crashed off the curve of the wall to plunge into the mob. Though the angle of the tunnel prevented his seeing them, he heard a shrill scream.

Quick footfalls approached. Two of the renegades sprang past the bend to send a barrage of flaming bullets at them. Kent smiled thinly as he leveled his gun and fired a single shot. Cap'n Hedricks' revolver blasted at the same instant.

The two men went down.

"More where that came from!" Cap'n exulted. But in his face was the knowledge that it would be a short fight, if a fierce one. Between them they had not over a dozen more bullets.

A RATTLE of gunfire broke out, the bullets smashing at the wall across

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from the prisoners and caroming into them. Several times they were saved only by the angle of the corner. As the echoes died away, Harbold spoke once more.

"I could keep this up all night, but what's the use?" he mocked them. "You picked the wrong place to hole up, gal. Remember I helped dig some of these shafts as a mucker, before I got smarter than your old man!"

Kent shuddered as he sensed some hidden meaning in the words. He glanced at Ann, saw her brows knit in thought.

"Or maybe you don't remember," the renegade pursued. "Me—I ain't forgetting that we carried a couple cases of *argonite* into this vault here! I got the keys—I got a match. What more do I need to plant a fuse in that stuff, get out of range, and blow you out proper? Or you can try to put it out . . . and draw a few dozen bullets from us!"

There was coarse, excited laughter from his crew. Stafford's mind pictured the heavy door being swung open even now. Ann Clayton's gasp pulled his eyes down to her face.

Then she was crying, "You fools! That's not a powder cache—the *argonite* will go off if the door isn't opened by someone who knows how!"

The news brought shocked silence. Kent hissed, "Ann—why didn't you let them do it? It was a chance."

She gasped, started to utter vain regrets, but stopped as Harbold's voice came again.

"I'll take my chances. I'll believe one of you when I get it in writing."

Hack Bacon shrilled, "Gimme the keys, Oak. We'll have 'em skyrocketing to hell in no time!"

Cold sweat broke out all over Kent. He pressed back behind the buttress, listened to the lower, more purposeful murmuring. Ann covered her face with her hands. Hedricks was silent and watchful. "Can't say we didn't warn 'em!" he smiled thinly.

Stafford's muscles felt like steel rods. Here in this tunnel, within a few moments, would be decided the fate of Hila Fonda. Would Harbold go ahead and open the door that was the gateway to death? And if he did—would they themselves ever leave alive?

Distinctly the rasp of keys came to their ears. In the next moment Harbold broke the silence. "Wait a minute!" he snapped. "She ain't said anything else. Maybe she was telling the truth!"

Then, breaking in on his words, was a shout from Bacon. "My God, boss—I can't get the keys out. *The door's opening by itself!*"

Silence, that was like a wire drawn tight . . . then shouts, scrambling, and a quick pounding of someone's boots coming toward the horrified trio.

In that instant the earth seemed to draw itself up and poise before exploding into millions of fragments. Vivid white flames sheeted down the tunnel past them. Through the dull thunder rolling up the shaft there knifed a chorus of agonized shrieks.

Kent's body seemed to expand, blown up by the concussion crushing him. It deflated with an awful suddenness, leaving him weak, stunned. Dust whirled and eddied through the passageway. Then he was jarred from his coma by the spectre that careened into view.

It was Oak Harbold, or what was left of him. He had run before the explosion took place, but his clothing hung in dirty shreds, and his skin was blackened and bloody. But in his fists he clutched his guns.

"You beat me, Stafford," he choked. "Tricked me. But you won't trick these!"

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Kent fired in the same moment Harbold's guns bucked. The two explosions lay atop one another in the dusty air. Oak Harbold stood for a moment as he had fired, then his whole frame shook with a mighty sigh and he dove solidly into the rocks. There was a glowing spot of red on his chest where the Venusian bullet had entered . . . to burn itself out even as Harbold's life had done.

Kent turned slowly to find Ann's hand.

"It's over," he murmured. "And nobody will be sorry for it. Harbold brought hell to Hila Fonda, and he died by it. We've won everything we fought for, including the right to live like Earthmen."

And as he watched the slow flush come into her pale cheeks, he knew he had won something more than that . . .

(Continued from page 97

been saved of the five—

His heart almost stopped beating as a tremulous cry came to him. A moment later, enfolding Aletha in his arms, he touched her golden hair wonderingly.

"Came here looking for gold," he murmured. "Found it!"

Then, ashamed of himself for the thought, he strode with her to the top of the slope and looked down into the vast ruin. He started suddenly. Something was moving on the slope, above the level of debris. It was Rand, crawling painfully on hands and knees!

Curwood ran down to him, picked him up in his strong arms. Rand's skin was blackened and blistered.

"I'll live!" he mumbled. "They must have turned the beam away too soon. . . . Great job you did, Tom—great—"

Allan Rand fainted then, in his friend's arms. Curwood trudged up the slope with his limp body. He and Aletha would nurse him back to life.

Tom Curwood glanced back once over his shoulder. Valley of Blue Mist was buried forever. Never would the world of man know, or believe—

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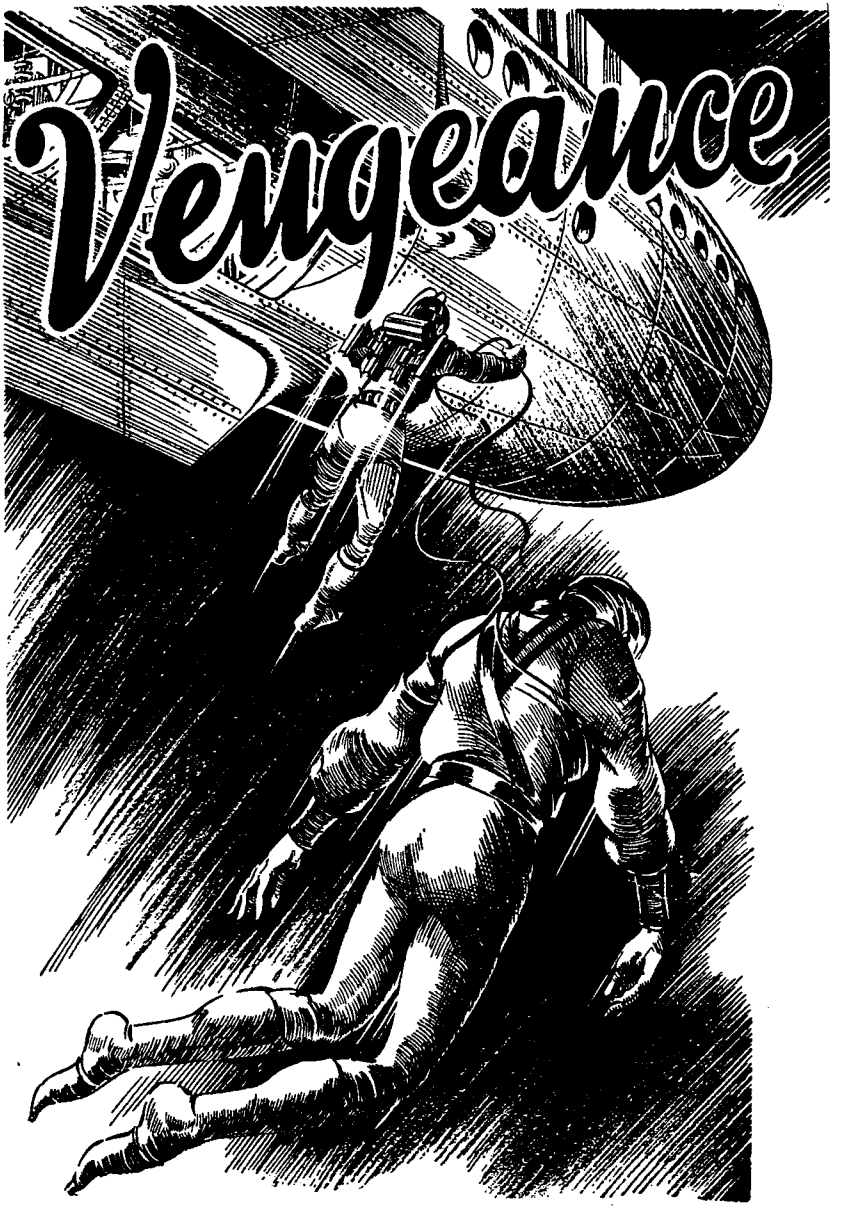

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from the Void

By FREDERIC ARNOLD KUMMER, Jr.

Brought back from death, Erik found Mars in a state of terror, and his vengeance was ruthless as space itself.

CHAPTER I

Resurrection in the Void

THE little space-car hung motionless, her rockets jetting thinly to combat the faint gravitational pull of Mars a thousand miles below. Stumpy, broad of beam, compared to the big sleek interplanetary cruisers, she seemed a giant fire-fly, lighting up the void with the flare of her exhausts. Rocket Runabout, Model A, the Martian yachting catalogues would list her, roomy, dependable, hundred thousand mile cruising range, ideal for family use as well as commuting between the red planet and its satellites.

Whatever the ship had been on leaving the factories of Mercis, it was evident now, however, that she was being used neither for casual cruises nor daily commuting. The wide overstuffed seats, the big television screen, and all those other luxurious features so emphatically stressed in the catalogues, had been removed; in their place was a bewildering array of scientific apparatus, cluttering the floor, the walls, the ceiling, even blocking to some extent the large glassex observation windows which lined the little vessel's sides. Retorts, beakers, microscopes, bottles of all sizes and shapes . . . curious tangles of tubes and wires . . . and a workbench covered with tools of every sort in that absolute disarray which, to the worker, is more convenient than orderliness. The little vessel was a complete, efficient flying laboratory.

In the midst of all this confusion sat a man, broad-shouldered, obese, red-nosed, with a fringe of rusty hair wreathing his bald head. Even in his white chemist's smock, with his hands full of test tubes, he did not conform to the popular conception of a scientist. He was fond of saying, this Dr. Marcus Thain, that with stooped shoulders and grey beard he would have an easier time in convincing the world that his discoveries were of importance.

At the forward end of the runabout's cockpit, in the seat facing the control panel, sat a girl. The twin terminals of a book-recording machine were clamped over her ears; absorbed in a novel she lay comfortably back in her chair quite oblivious to the scientist hard at work only a few feet away. The girl's mannish attire of boots, breeches, and open-necked shirt seemed to emphasize rather than detract from her slim, very feminine loveliness. Her hair, like Dr. Thain's hirsute fringe, was the color of a rust-red Martian plain.

All at once the girl bent down, snapped off the switch of the book-recorder. Taking the two light crystalloid plugs from her ears, she stood up.

"Time for lunch," she announced.

"Umm," Dr. Thain grunted. Then,

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a trifle peevishly, "Why do you always decide to eat just when I'm deep in work . . .?"

"Only because you're always deep in work," Anna Thain laughed. "The cosmic rays'll be there after you've finished."

Her father chuckled, slid off his high stool.

"You're right as usual," he said, patting his large paunch. "I'm just beginning to realize how hungry I was. What's in the ice-box?"

ANNA, her hand on the knob of the food-locker, did not answer. Eyes fixed on the big forward observation port, she was staring into the surrounding darkness.

"Something adrift," she murmured. "Look. Over there. You can see the sun's rays reflected from it."

Dr. Thain followed her gaze. Far to the right a small indistinguishable object was drifting by them, evidently caught by the weak distant pull of Mars.

"Bit of wreckage," the doctor shrugged. "Or something dropped overboard by a space liner. Maybe a piece of meteor . . ."

Anna picked up a pair of powerful binoculars. Raising the glasses to her eyes, she turned the adjustment screw.

"Funny," her voice sounded strained, a trifle frightened. "It looks like—Dad! It's . . . it's a human body!"

"Eh? A corpse?" Dr. Thain took the binoculars from her, adjusted them to his own eyes. "By Jupiter! You're right! Victim of some spacewreck, I daresay! God only knows how long he's been floating out there in the ether! Take the controls and pull up alongside of him. I'll dig out a space-suit . . ."

"What!" Anna's smoke-blue eyes widened with horror. "You . . . you don't mean to bring a . . . a dead man aboard?"

"Why not, my dear?" Dr. Thain seemed surprised. "Death is merely a natural physical phenomenon. And I can assure you that the body will be perfectly preserved by the cold out there. I conceive it our duty to pick up this corpse. It may contain information of some tragic disaster. And there may be friends, relatives, who would like to see it buried in consecrated ground."

Anna nodded, tight-lipped.

"All right," she forced a laugh. "I've lost all my appetite for lunch now, anyhow."

"Right, then." Dr. Thain took a space-suit from the emergency life-locker, squeezed his bulk into it. With consummate skill Anna moved the controls, edging the runabout toward the floating body at a barely perceptible rate of space-speed. Tiny threads of flame jetted from the little craft's rocket-tubes; very gently it approached the body.

Dr. Thain was in the air-lock now, his face ruddy behind the glassex front of his helmet. Crouched low, gripping an iron hand-hold, he swung out, extended his free right arm. Very slowly Anna brought the runabout closer. All at once the doctor lunged outward, seized one of the stiff, frozen feet and, after some difficulty, drew the body into the air-lock beside him. The outer door of the lock swung shut and a moment later Dr. Thain was placing the body upon his long workbench.

Anna set the controls in position to keep the runabout stationary and while her father divested himself of the clumsy space-suit, stared with macabre fascination at the corpse from the void.

THE dead man was young, dark-haired, and hawk-faced. His expression was peaceful, though somewhat drawn, and there seemed to be no

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wound or injury on his lean, muscular body. The clothes he wore were plain, and of outmoded cut, yet exceedingly fine in quality. From his costume, with its loose cellosilk blouse, its blue spun-glass trousers, one would have taken him for a person of some consequence, the scion of a wealthy Martian family, or perhaps a rising young business man already successful in the humming trade centers of the red planet. Upon his finger the man wore a large ring; its device (an anvil and a ploughshare, surmounted by a beaker) seemed to Anna somehow familiar. She was trying to puzzle this out when Dr. Thain, free at last of the space-suit, stepped forward.

"Too bad, isn't it?" he murmured. "Nice-looking boy. Died of strangulation . . . lack of air . . . I see. No other signs of injury. Common enough when a ship is ripped open by a meteor or shattered by an internal explosion. Let's see if there's any identification in his pockets."

The dead man's pockets, however, were empty. His clothes bore the label of a well-known tailor in Mercis, capital of Mars.

"Odd," Dr. Thain shook his head. "Most people would have something on their persons, if only money or trinkets. Rather a mystery, this poor chap. What a story he might tell us if he could talk once more!"

"Talk!" Anna shuddered. "How horrible! Let's drop the body back into the void where it will remain in peace! Nothing to be gained by taking it to Mars, if there's no identification!"

"Umm," her father nodded absently, his eyes on the stiff white corpse. All at once he straightende up, his pouchy little eyes glowing. "Anna! I . . . I . . . God, child, what an opportunity! Listen, you've heard of cases where a person dead by strangulation, with none of the bodily organs injured, has been brought back to life after as long as fifteen minutes by an injection of adrenalin into the heart? An old method, known for centuries. After fifteen or twenty minutes, however, it is impossible to bring them back due to coagulation of the blood, the decay of the higher brain cells!

But think . . . this man has been in space since his death, in a temperature approaching absolute zero! In a vacuum free of bacteria! No chance for frozen blood to coagulate, no chance for decay of bodily cells in that bitter cold! As far back as the 1930's there was a chap, a Russian, I believe, who kept dogs in living death by freezing them! Why not . . ." *

"Oh!" Anna's face went white. "It . . . it's impossible! After so long a time . . ."

"No harm in trying!" The doctor rooted among a drawer full of apparatus, drew out a long slender hypodermic needle. From his well-stocked shelves he took a tiny vial labeled "adrenalin," filled the hypodermic. "Now then, if you'll open his blouse just above the heart . . ."

Anna, her fingers trembling, unbuttoned the dead man's shirt. His flesh was cold, hard. Dr. Thain lit a small tri-oxine burner, sterilized the point of the needle, then turned the cabin's heating units on full. Slowly the corpse grew warm, thawing after the bitter temperatures of space.

"In another minute," Thain whispered. "As soon as the blood is hot enough to flow freely . . ." With a small knife he pricked the dead man's

* More recently, and with a human being, this marvel has been accomplished by a Dutch Scientist, Dr. De Lample, using a glandular extract from young cows, called vitaprolongin, which enabled him to freeze the body solid for forty-two days, after which time the subject, a woman by the name of Anna Broog, was rescusitated. (See AMAZING STORIES, February issue)—ED.

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arm, nodded as blood oozed out onto the skin. "Now . . .!"

Horrified, Anna watched her father place the point of the needle upon the man's breast, sink it in up to the guard. An instant later he drew it out, bandaged the small wound. No signs of life animated the pallid face on the table. With a swiftness unbelievable for his bulk, Dr. Thain bent over the still figure, commenced to administer artificial respiration. Long minutes passed. Anna gazed at the corpse, paralyzed. Who was this man they sought to return to life? What would he be if they succeeded? A primitive beast, a being without a soul? What dreadful story. . . .

All at once Dr. Thain ceased his efforts, straightened up.

"No use," he murmured. "I guess . . ."

He broke off, staring. A convulsive shudder had passed through the body on the table. Anna's hand fluttered to her mouth, stifling a scream. The man from the void was struggling to one elbow, eyes wide with terror. His lips, still bluish from the cold, moved faintly.

"No!" he whispered. Then, in a frenzied, rising scream, "No!" Suddenly, as though overcome with exhaustion, he fell back upon the table, breathing heavily.

"Anna!" Dr. Thain's voice was triumphant. "He's alive! Alive, once more! Head for home! Quickly!"

CHAPTER II

"My Name Is Erik . . ."

MARS, like the Gaul of Terrestrial legend, is divided into three parts. One, the ice fields of the polar caps, which, melting, fill the great canals, their small arms, and finally the tiny irrigation ditches; the second, those green fertile areas that border the canals and supply the red planet with food; and third, the vast stretches of barren rust-colored desert.

Man-made, these deserts, the result of the Martians' profligate waste of their vast iron deposits. Here, in the old days, a steel building, about to be replaced by a finer one, was allowed to rust away; here a boy dropped a pocket knife and disdained to pick it up; here a great battle scattered tons of iron, covering miles of ground with rust.

And as the millenniums passed, red patches began to appear on the planet's green surface, like leprous sores, ever spreading. Water and iron . . . uniting to give off hydrogen and ferric oxide. Water and iron, necessary above all else to civilzation, to life, transformed by man's waste to unbreathable hydrogen and useless rust.

With the coming of the Terrestrials, however, the decadent civilization of Mars had taken new life. The Martian Reclamation Company commenced work upon the red planet armed with a secret formula for reversing nature's process and transforming the hydrogen in the air and the rust-laden soil of the deserts back into iron and water. The latter was, of course, the most important product.

From the great Reclamation Centers in the deserts long pipelines led to newformed communities, little oases in the sea of rust-colored clay, the denizens of which were glad to pay a small sum for the life-giving water.

In time, men said, there would be sufficient moisture for clouds, rain, but until this happy future day, they were dependent, as their fathers had been before them, on the all-powerful M. R. C.

It was in such an artificial oasis that Dr. Thain and his daughter made their home. Several barren miles outside of

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Psidis it lay, a neat little crystalloid villa, surrounded by a small garden. The Reclamation Company's pipe line supplied them with water, pumped from the great center at Psidis. A hangar for the space-car, the distant towers of the city, were the only other objects to break the flat, desolate horizon.

Inside, the house was more cheerful. To fight off loneliness while her father was busy Anna devoted most of her time to the furnishing and upkeep of their home.

On this particular night, however, the living room had lost its usual neatness. Bottles, bandages, scientific equipment of every sort littered the chairs, the tables. Upon a sofa lay the man from the void, very pale, but still breathing. Anna and her father, hollow-eyed from a long night's vigil, stood staring at him.

"HE'LL do," Thain nodded. "I was afraid after the adrenalin had worn off . . . Ah, he's coming to!"

Very abruptly the lean muscular man from the void sat up, his eyes clouded with doubt.

"Jarth . . . the airlock . . ." he muttered. "Who . . . who are you?"

"Marcus Thain. And my daughter, Anna. We found your body drifting in space, brought you back to life by means of an adrenalin injection."

"Back to life!" A curiously bitter smile passed over the man's features. "Where are we?"

"Near Psidis, on Mars," Anna replied.

"Psidis!" The young man bowed his head. "What year?"

"2163."

"2163! Fifteen years! God! God!"

"Easy, lad, easy," Thain placed a hand upon the youth's shoulder. "Let your mind piece things together slowly. First tell us your name. You'll have friends, relatives, to notify . . ."

"Friends? Relatives?" The young man laughed. "None that would be glad to see me. Better, perhaps, if you had left me out yonder in the void. Unless . . ." He gazed at the doctor reflectively. "You're a scientist, aren't you? Your skill in bringing me back proves that."

"I am," Dr. Thain nodded.

"Good," the stranger replied. "I, too, was a scientist before . . . You see, I have nowhere to go, nowhere to turn, since you have revived me. But I could work as your assistant for my food and keep."

"Well" . . . Thain shook a ponderous head . . . "I suppose in a way you're my responsibility, now. We'll call it a deal. Can't see what all the mystery's about, though. And if we don't know your name . . ."

"You can call me . . . Erik."

For a long moment he stared through the window, his eyes on the red plain, the tiny patch of green that surrounded the house. Then, smiling at Anna, "Your lawn needs water."

The girl studied the brown, faded grass.

"Ours and all others," she said soberly. "Hensic, head of M. R. C. has been raising water rates steadily. The farmers are desperate, yet at the first sign of rebellion their water is cut off entirely, their crops ruined. The government is weak, controlled by the Reclamation Company. Hensic lives like a king, surrounded by every luxury and Mars is helpless. If only someone would rid Mars of . . ."

"Hush, child!" The doctor raised a warning hand. "If one of Hensic's agents were to overhear you . . .!"

"But surely in your own home . . .!" The man who called himself Erik gazed at them incredulously.

"No one is safe in any place," Thain muttered. "Spies everywhere . . . dic-

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tophones installed during one's absence . . . ah, it is an unhappy Mars to which we have brought you, my boy!"

"So." For a long moment Erik said no word. When at last he spoke, it was in a bitter, yet sad, voice. "Let me thank you, doctor, for all you have done. Someday I will be able to explain who I am, why I must remain silent. Meanwhile, I hope to be of help to you, earn my keep." Then, half-aloud, "Mars . . . ruined . . .!"

THE months that followed the arrival of the man from the void brought pleasant changes to the Thain household. The doctor soon discovered that Erik was his equal, and more, in certain fields of research; and with the aid of so brilliant an assistant his work progressed more rapidly than ever before.

In addition, Anna found in Erik a companion to lift the loneliness of her secluded existence . . . a companion whose friendship grew to mean more and more as the days passed. His oddly outmoded expressions amused her, and she found his evasive mysterious air somehow intriguing, a puzzle that she tried her best to solve.

In spite of all her efforts, however, Erik remained as much of an enigma as when they had found him, a corpse in the void. These facts alone were evident . . . that he was a scientist, that he had lived on Mars in or near Psidis, that his death had occurred some fifteen years before, and that he had a bitter, yet intense, interest in the ruthless, grasping Martian Reclamation Company.

Two things occupied the bulk of Erik's spare time. One, a queer tangle of wires and tubes in a corner of his room, a machine of some sort which he was building of materials from Dr. Thain's laboratory. Just what the machine was intended to be, he would not say. The other thing that seemed to cause him great concern was the suffering of the people under M. R. C.'s rising rates for water.

Day after day he would set out, either on foot or in the doctor's runabout, and visit the neighboring oases, the wretched little farms where ragged peasants, husbanding their dearly-bought water as though it were liquid gold, sought to grow crops in the dry, brick-red soil. These visits, often of two or three days' duration, were a source of considerable speculation to Dr. Thain and his daughter, yet Erik, with a strange mixture of tact and bluntness, evaded all questioning. Looking at his lean, intense face, his deep, brooding eyes, Anna felt that he was being driven on by some fierce inner emotion, a fanatical passion which superseded all lesser hopes and desires.

IT was a hot, scorching night in the month of Elat when the blow fell. Erik was on one of his mysterious trips and Dr. Thain and his daughter were sitting in the living room, watching a television newscast. Anna had just crossed the room to adjust the dials of the televisor when a loud knocking sounded at the door.

"Umm," Dr. Thain raised his massive bulk from the armchair, approached the door. "Some poor devil of a farmer begging for water, I suppose. If that madman Hensic doesn't lower rates soon . . ." Shaking his head, he turned the knob.

Three men in the familiar grey uniform of the M.R.C. special police stood on the threshold. Roughly they brushed past Thain, strode into the room. Their leader, a brutish, black-browed sergeant, motioned his two companions forward.

"Search the house!" he snapped.

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"Hurry!"

"What!" The doctor's round face grew crimson. "By whose authority do you dare . . ."

"By authority of the Martian Reclamation Company!" the sergeant interrupted coldly. "Word has reached us that you are harboring a dangerous criminal who seeks to overthrow M.R.C. With thousands of Martian citizens dependent upon us for their existence, the state has granted us ex-officio powers for the protection and maintenance of the water lines." He touched the flame-gun at his belt. "You and the girl stand over there against the wall!"

"Erik . . . a dangerous criminal!" Anna, her face colorless, moved to her father's side. Dr. Thain shook his head wearily, remained silent. Upstairs they could hear the banging of doors, the movement of furniture. After perhaps ten minutes search the two men returned to the living room, frowning.

"Skipped," one of them grunted. "Must have been tipped off."

The leader of the group turned to Dr. Thain, his eyes stern.

"Where is this man, Erik?" he snapped.

"I don't know." Thain shook his head. "He makes many trips . . ."

"Lies, as usual," the sergeant growled. "These swine stick together."

He glanced through the open doorway at the big rocket-plane outside. "Take them out to the plane. We've ways at Psidis of getting the truth out of 'em. They'll be glad enough to tell their friend's hiding place after a few days in the examination chamber!"

Grinning, the two guards stepped forward, flame-guns drawn.

"No!" Anna whispered. "No! You can't . . ."

"Come, child." Dr. Thain, very calm, dignified, took her arm. "I have friends at Psidis. And Hensic cannot be so cruel as to permit innocent persons to suffer . . ."

"Huh!" The sergeant laughed harshly, reached for his gun. "Fools! Take them . . ."

He broke off abruptly, whirling at the sound of footsteps behind him.

"You wish to see me?" Erik, a thin, fighting smile on his dark face, stood in the doorway.

"By Jupiter!" The police agent frowned, reached for his gun. "Seize him!"

As he spoke, Erik, poised on the threshold, plunged forward. A lurid streak of flame spat from the black-browed leader's gun, singeing Erik's hair. An instant later his fist thudded against the sergeant's jaw, with all the force of a wiry, close-knit frame behind it. Limply the sergeant slumped to the floor.

OF the remaining two police agents one stood facing Dr. Thain and Anna, flame-gun drawn, to keep them from coming to Erik's assistance; any attempt to aid his comrade would, he knew, expose him to an attack from the huge, red-faced doctor. The other agent, recovering from his initial surprise, spun about to face the man from the void. No time to raise his gun, fire; Erik seized the man's wrist, bored in at close quarters. For perhaps twenty seconds they swayed, muscles cracking, faces bright with sweat.

Watching, Anna was tense with anxiety. The two men, breathing heavily, gasping, as they fought . . . the grim expression of the agent who kept her and the doctor covered . . . the sergeant on the floor, stirring weakly; in another moment he would be sufficiently recovered to join in the struggle once more.

Outside, a dust storm from the desert

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was rising; she could hear the moan of the wind, the rattle of sand against the windows, see the light of the twin moons grow dim as the clouds of swirling dust covered them with a reddish pall. At the girl's side Dr. Thain crouched slightly, prepared to spring should the guard's gaze turn to the struggle.

All at once Erik's opponent gave a shout of triumph. A quick twist had freed his right arm; drawing it back, he struck with paralyzing force. Erik staggered across the room, toppled to the floor.

"So!" the man laughed gratingly. "You thought you . . . !" The agent's words ended in a gurgling moan. From the floor Erik had fired, using the flame-gun dropped by the sergeant. A stench of charred flesh filled the room; the M.R.C. agent pitched forward on his face, a horrible blackened corpse.

Two of his opponents disposed of, Erik turned to the third, the man who was guarding Anna and Dr. Thain. This agent, seized by sudden panic, acted swiftly. With a quick movement he grasped Anna's arm and, using the girl as a shield, backed through the doorway.

"Don't shoot!" Dr. Thain's voice was heavy with despair. "You'll kill Anna!"

Erik nodded and, dropping the gun, started out in pursuit. A burst of flame, fired over the girl's shoulder, drove him back to the shelter of the house. Helpless, he and Dr. Thain watched the agent force the girl into the plane, saw it leap from the earth with a flare of rocket exhaust.

"Anna!" Dr. Thain whispered. "My little girl! If that madman Hensic harms her. . . !"

Erik, busy lashing the sergeant's arms, straightened up, smiled bitterly.

"Hensic is capable of anything," he said. "We must act now . . . at once!"

"Act?" The scientist shook his massive head hopelessly. "What can we hope to do?"

"Do?" The fierce brooding emotions of the man from the void came to life in a blaze of hatred. "I'll show you what we can do! Wait here!"

He ran upstairs to his room, returned staggering under a load of strange apparatus. One portion of it, the queer array of tubes and wires over which he had spent so many long evenings, Erik placed carefully upon the floor. The other, a small, home-made broadcasting unit tuned to a special wave band, he plugged into the socket of one of the *radite* lamps.

For some moments he adjusted switches, dials, connected wires. At last, with all in readiness, he began to speak into the crude microphone. His voice was vital, dynamic; Dr. Thain felt, somehow, that Erik had waited, planned, lived for this moment.

"Freemen of Mars!" he exclaimed. "Since the death of that beloved old scientist, Hrolf Steinson, the Martian Reclamation Company has been in the hands of Jarth Hensic! No need for me to tell you what Hensic has done since he inherited the controling interest of the company from his brother-in-law, Hrolf Steinson! You who seek to live in the reclaimed lands know of the rate increases, the crops ruined for lack of water, the terrible price you have been made to pay that Hensic might wallow in unimaginable luxury! Just profits no man begrudges him. Exorbitant water rates we cannot, will not pay! Grain fields dying for lack of water, men everywhere reduced to the most abject poverty, innocent people dying of thirst!"

Erik paused, bent lower over the table.

"In the six months I have been among you I have said that science would find

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a way to overcome Hensic's guns, his planes. That weapon has been completed! We march on Psidis at once! Tonight! You who are listening must tell the others in your group! Meet at dawn before the walls of the Central Unit! Strike while you may for the freedom of Mars!"

CHAPTER III

Erik Acts

JARTH HENSIC, president of the Martian Reclamation Company, stood before a window of his luxurious suite in the Central Unit at Psidis. Beneath him lay the great factory, largest of the hundreds which dotted Mars' desert area, a vast array of grey stone buildings, cranes, lifts, slag heaps, and massive machinery, rearing up to form a strange surrealist pattern against the fierce blue sky. Plumes of reddish smoke waved above the tall chimneys and the deep hum of atomic motors arose like the drone of angry wasps.

In long lines across the flat barren desert could be seen atomo-cars, bringing in loads of the rust-laden soil; great inverted cones placed around the factory grounds sucked in the air, to draw from it hydrogen. Ingots of iron, reclaimed, were piled in tall stacks awaiting shipment to all portions of the planet; and huge aqueducts, running like the spokes of a wheel from the Central Unit, distributed the life-giving water to thousands of square miles of irrigated farm land about Psidis. Power . . . the power of life and death over millions of people lay in this and other factories of the M.R.C. Standing there before the window a thin cruel smile passed over Hensic's saturnine features.

"Water!" he whispered. "Life!" And his curved, talon-like fingers gripped the window-sill until his knuckles were a row of white dots.

Hesitant footsteps sounded in the room behind him.

"Mr. Hensic . . ." A silver-haired old secretary bowed deeply . . . "only one of our agents has returned from the investigation of Dr. Thain. The man known as Erik escaped capture, as did Thain. Our agent was able, however, to bring the doctor's daughter for questioning. I am afraid, sir, that trouble is imminent. Perhaps a less autocratic policy might be advisable. In your brother-in-law's time . . ."

"Trouble!" Hensic laughed scornfully. "Huh! The swine will either pay our prices or die of thirst! All the people of Mars, except those who live on the canals, are dependent upon us! And the canal-dwellers have no interest in our affairs! What if this man Erik did escape? Sooner or later he must fall into our hands! Send in the agent and this girl!"

"Yes, sir." The old man bowed, left the room. A moment later the grey-uniformed special agent entered, accompanied by Anna. Although pale, dishevelled, the girl was very lovely in her sheer cello-silk gown. Hensic smiled coldly, moistened his thin lips.

"What occurred?" he demanded, glancing at the agent.

Faltering under Hensic's searching gaze, the man told his story.

"So," Hensic murmured. "This Erik puts three of my agents to flight! Tell me, what sort of man is he?"

"Young, dark, rather hollow-eyed. Aquiline nose, wiry build. He wore a ring with the M.R.C. device upon it."

"Erik . . . lean face . . . and that ring . . ." A look of fear flickered in Hensic's eyes. Then, straightening up, "Ah, but how foolish I am! *He* would be old, now, middle-aged. And he's dead. Can't help but be . . . You,

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girl, where did this man come from? Tell me all you know about him!"

Anna stared at Hensic, her face white, but determined.

"Erik is a patriot. He intends to free the people you have enslaved. Beyond that" . . . the girl threw back her head . . . "I will tell you nothing!"

"Brave words," Hensic's pale eyes hardened sardonically. "You'll forget your fine gestures in the . . . examination rooms. Before the day is out you'll be . . ."

A sound of running feet, hoarse voices, echoed through the hall outside. Hensic whirled about as the door burst open. Several wild-eyed men in grey ran into the room.

"Mr. Hensic!" one of them gasped. "Revolt! Farmers, peasants from the reclaimed districts, are trying to force the north gate!"

"Revolt?" Hensic grinned evilly. "I've been expecting this, since last night when I learned of a rabble-rousing broadcast by this man Erik. Use the 20-power flame-guns on this mob, wipe it out. With Erik and his followers burned to a crisp there'll be no more uprisings! The flame-guns, f o o l ! Hurry!"

AS Hensic spoke, the north gate of the factory was already ablaze with the fire of small hand guns. From the top of the massive crystalloid wall, from vantage points on the roof of the great grey factory, guards were pouring a heavy fire into the small band of rebels who sought to storm the gate. Armed with antiquated weapons, crude home-made force rays, the group of ragged, half-starved peasants were mowed down like ripe grain.

"Back! Back!" Erik, h i s f a c e marked with burns, his clothes scorched by the close-licking tongues of flame, waved his followers toward an outlying building. Scarce five hundred out of the thousand who had stormed the gate, they dashed across the blackened, seared yard into the warehouse.

"God!" Dr. Thain glanced out at the heaps of charred bodies before the gate. "This is madness! We have no chance!"

Erik did not reply. A hundred beams of lambent flame were playing upon their place of refuge, melting the glass of the windows, heating the walls until it was impossible to approach them. Lying on the floor of the warehouse, the stern-faced peasants raised themselves to the level of the windows, fired quickly with their old-fashioned guns, then dropped out of sight once more.

Watching, Thain could see limp figures topple from the wall of the factory, or roll down its slanting roof. Hensic's men, however, were better armed, better trained, and the losses of the rebels continued to mount. Suddenly the doctor's face fell into drawn lines. Great cylinders were being dragged into place on the factory walls, 20-power flame guns which would blast the warehouse to bits in a few minutes.

"Look!" He gripped Erik's arm, pointed through the inferno of smoke and flame. "Big guns! This building won't last an instant!"

Erik nodded, turned to the tall young farmer at his side.

"You have tapped the power lines, Garth?" he snapped.

The young man nodded. "This warehouse is fed from the power plants of Psidis. Everything is ready on the floor below."

"Good!" Erik nodded. "Come along, doctor!"

On the ground floor of the building, facing a window, was an improvised platform of boxes, bales. Power cables ran to the top of the platform, terminating in a compact array of tubes, con-

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densers, filters and spark gaps . . . the same mysterious device of which Erik hoped so much. Studying it, the doctor was able to distinguish a crystal of silicon carbide, resistance coils, tiny electromagnets, and a silver-sheathed projector, not unlike the focal point of a Röntgen ray machine. In spite of its intricacy, however, the device was less than two feet square.

"This little thing?" Thain shook his head hopelessly. "You plan to use that to combat 20-power flame-guns?"

"Right!" Erik bent over the device, made delicate adjustments. "It happens, doctor, that the one thing I know is . . . water. I was brought up, trained to be an integral part of the M.R.C. and as such I spent my entire youth studying water. No time to explain, now, except to say that this machine emanates a stream of especially charged neutrons, neutrons vibrating at such a rate as to have a most peculiar effect upon H_2O. Like the cyclotrons, the atom-smashers of the twentieth century, this bombardment of neutrons will tear apart molecules of water. In a sense it might be said to reverse the process by which M.R.C. obtains water from hydrogen and ferric oxide . . . that is, it breaks molecules of water down into its component parts, free atoms of hydrogen and oxygen."

"And you call that a weapon?" Thain muttered. "You're mad! I . . ." He broke off as a ranging blast from one of the big flame-guns struck the warehouse. Molten stone dripped, lava-like, down the walls. Heat, unbearable, searing heat, rocked the doctor's senses.

WITH a quick leap Erik sprang to the platform, touched a lever. Reeling, choking, Thain peered out. A thin cone of yellow lashed out from Erik's machine, encircling the heavy battery. And at the point of contact an amazing thing happened. The guards who manned the guns began to swell, balloon-like, into grotesque travesties of human beings. Then suddenly, as though the balloon had been punctured, they collapsed, fell, shriveled broken things, from the walls. More men and still more, swelling and then deflating as the inexorable yellow ray played upon the rampart.

"What . . ." Dr. Thain's voice was a hoarse whisper . . . what is it?"

"Dessication," Erik said slowly. "I said that all water would be broken down into hydrogen and oxygen. The human body is over eighty per cent water. First the liberated gases, hydrogen and oxygen, swell the skin until, breaking it open to escape, they leave only a dust-dry fragment of shattered bone and parched, cracked skin. I . . . Ah, they're coming again!"

The gates of the vast Central Unit had swung open. In a desperate effort to capture the terrible ray-projector that had destroyed their companions, Hensic's men surged toward the warehouse.

Again Erik bent over the dessicator. Once more the lambent yellow ray shot out, sweeping the line of grey-uniformed troopers. Watching, Thain felt weak with horror. To see them swell under the expanding gases, hear them burst with a sickening pop. Then ghastly, mummy-like things, dry skin over protruding skeletons, toppling to the ground! For only a moment the attack continued. Suddenly the handful of survivors threw down their flame-guns, took to their heels.

"Into the factory!" Erik cried. "After them! Quickly!"

With shouts of triumph the tattered peasants dashed from the warehouse, swept into the huge Central Unit. Onward, brushing aside all attempts at opposition, pouring through the great

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workshops, the luxurious business offices.

"This way!" Dr. Thain, his red face exultant, motioned toward Hensic's suite. "Quick, before he escapes!"

A furious roar went up from the crowd of rebels. With one mighty surge they tore open the carved doors, pressed into the room.

Hensic sat behind his big desk, a cold smile on his thin countenance; in his hand he held a small flame-gun. Before the desk, lashed to a chair, was Anna, pale, yet erect.

"Ah!" Hensic glanced up, carelessly. "Guests, I see. Don't be too hasty, gentlemen. It would be so easy to dispatch this charming young woman. Her life shall buy me freedom."

A THICK silence fell over the room. The crowd of insurgents halted indecisively, staring at Hensic. Dr. Thain glanced imploringly at them, bowed his head.

"So," Hensic chuckled. "I win my liberty. And you thought, no doubt, to find me cringing with fear! Bah! I fear no man . . ."

"Not even me?" Erik pushed his way through the crowd. "Look at me . . . uncle!"

At sight of Erik a terrible change came over Hensic. His face took on a greenish pallor, his lips quivered weakly. The gun fell from his palsied fingers; he raised his hands as though warding off a frightful apparition.

"No!" he croaked. "No!"

"So you remember me, then!" Erik leaned forward, his eyes stern. "Perhaps you recall the day my father, Hrolf Steinson, died. You and I were on Terra then, Uncle Jarth, where I was studying chemistry and you were wasting your brother-in-law's money, living in idleness. We took the same ship back to Mars when we learned of his death, the *Kylos*, a new liner that spring fifteen years ago. And perhaps you remember that night three days out, when we were alone on the promenade desk, standing by the emergency air-lock.

"It was quickly done, Uncle Jarth, that sudden blow which sent me into the air-lock. A moment later you pulled the release, catapulting me out into the void. Only a second's consciousness I had, as the expanding air rushed from my mouth, my nose . . . and then I was dead! *Dead*, Uncle Jarth, leaving you to inherit M. R. C.!

"Now after fifteen years I have returned, returned from the dead to see justice done!" Erik Steinson's voice cracked like a stinging lash. "Do you remember, Uncle Jarth?"

Hensic, slumped down in his chair, stared at Erik, insane terror in his eyes. All at once he stood up, incoherent words bubbling from his lips. For just an instant he remained erect, then, eyes glazed, clutching at his heart, toppled to the floor. Dr. Thain, kneeling to touch his wrist, shook a sombre head.

"Anna!" Erik sprank forward, cut the girl's bonds. "You're all right?"

"All right," she repeated softly. "Now that you're here."

His arm about Anna's shoulders, Erik faced the group of ragged farmers.

"M. R. C. is no longer a privately-owned company," he said. "I, as its owner, present it to the people of Mars. It is too big, too vital a power over hundreds of millions of people, to remain in the hands of one man. For me, I shall stick to my work as Dr. Thain's assistant . . . if he'll have me . . ."

"Have you?" Anna laughed. "His own . . . son-in-law?"

"Anna!" Quite oblivious to the others in the room Erik swept her into his arms. "I'm glad . . . glad I died out there in the void! If I hadn't, I might never have met you!"

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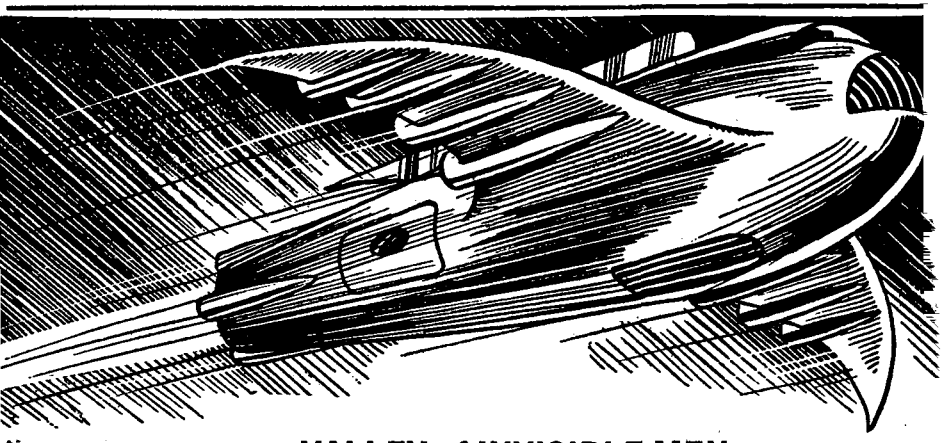

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